

**AFROCENTRICITY AND KNOWLEDGE**

# Adjusting the Narrative Lens



The distortions of history produced in the West during a time when Africans were either enslaved or colonised have continued to direct the thinking of most modern historians.

By Molefi Kete Asante

I suspect that until we reset the social sciences, humanities, sciences and arts more closely to our own historical narratives we will continue to assume the role of junior brother and sister to other world narratives

as if our own experiences, that is, those of our ancestors, are less important than others.<sup>1</sup> Hence, I have proposed a re-alignment of all forms of historical, philosophical, and economic investigations toward an Afrocentric

orientation to knowledge and I have not been alone in this effort.<sup>2</sup>

This begins with the proper interface to the emergence of homo sapiens on the continent of Africa whether in the Rift Valley or as has recently been

asserted in Morocco. What we know is that homo sapiens appears between 350,000 and 200,000 years ago in Africa. There are no examples of homo sapiens earlier in other parts of the world. In fact, there are no instances where homo sapiens are found in Europe, Australia, Asia, or the Americas prior to Africa. Our species emerged in Africa and spent nearly two-thirds of human time on earth has been spent in Africa. One can reasonably assert that prior to 70,000 every human was black; one can definitely say that all homo sapiens were Africans.

Cheikh Anta Diop's work, *The African Origin of Civilization* established the fact that humans in Africa also created the first civilisations on the earth.<sup>3</sup> It is not simply the fact that homo sapiens first stood up erect on African soil but that homo sapiens first named god, first built barges, first domesticated animals, first built villages to protect humans from other animals, first decided what was edible and what was poisonous to eat, and so forth. The organisation of collective protection measures, administration of rational forms of punishment for bringing shame to the community, and the exploitation of the resources of nature for food, were all related to the growing ability of human beings to develop civilization.

An immense record exists of the emergence in Africa of every foundational basis for modern civilisation. Nothing escaped the early humans who occupied the continent. We know, for instance, that African women created the earliest mathematical computers as they marked the time of their female cycles. Understandably these calculators reach back nearly forty thousand years ago in Swaziland with the discovery of the Lebombo bone and 28,000 years ago in Congo with the Ishango bone calculator. There should be no wonder that this marvelous continent, the original home of humankind, also gave us ancient paintings on the walls of caves throughout its vast territory. Each day it appears that Africa reveals more of itself and yet there is so much more to be revealed in time because scholars have barely unearthed one-tenth of the possible

areas of archaeological and historical research. Nabta Playa, a rich field of stone artifacts and tumuli, in the far southwest of Egypt and crossing over into Libya, has shown itself to be the oldest such archaeological region in the world making Stonehenge in the United Kingdom appear like a relatively recent experiment. Africa's Nabta Playa is the oldest known astronomical megalith field on earth.<sup>4</sup> It was created between 12,000 to 14,000 years ago. Stonehenge, for example, was erected around 5000 years ago and Teotihuacan appears in Mexico about 2000 years ago.

I have argued in two of my books that the distortions of history produced in the West during a time when Africans were either enslaved or colonised have continued to direct the

**“The cultural question as constructed by the Afrocentrists is not merely literature, art, music, and dance, but the entire process by which Africans are socialised to live in the modern world.”**

thinking of most modern historians.<sup>5</sup> They are stuck in what Basil Davidson once told me was a “cycle of disbelief.” They cannot accept Africa's primacy in anything because they were led to believe by many years of negative thinking and bad history that Africa had never produced any civilisations. They were able to say this in a Trumpian way, that is, while you are looking at the evidence and examining it with your own eyes they are telling you what you are seeing is incorrect.

Of course, we are rational human beings and as such we investigate, question, and demand to see more evidence. One of the most powerful examples of substance fact in a concrete way is what our African ancestors left on the earth. Early on in the dynastic age of ancient Egypt, called Kemet by

Africans long before the young Greeks imposed Aegyptos on the world, a singular fact overwhelms and awes us: the construction of the pyramids.

The pyramid stands as the most important human construction in the ancient world. The pyramid, the *mr*, is an eternal and nearly indestructible monument honoring the passionate spiritual power of the enduring notion of eternal life. It is not merely an architectural wonder, but a seed, *asili*, in the words of Marimba Ani, that announces its primacy as a building and as a perfect monument to excellence.

Throughout the world the West has imposed its version of human history as the universal view. Consequently we learn that Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are at the head of the class when it comes to a discourse on civilization. But how could that be since Homer lived about 800 BC and the first pyramid was designed and constructed by the African Imhotep about 2800 BC, almost 2000 years before Homer was born? There is no doubt in my mind that we have been hoodwinked and lied to and lied about by those who first created the idea of humans as inferior and superior to protect their own narrative. Why aren't African pyramids considered the most profound creations of antiquity? One finds that they contain writing, mathematics, literature, philosophy, measurement, religion, medicine, and aesthetics. It is not possible to conceive of an instrument of human civilization more pronounced in the ancient world.

This is why the general perspective that I have proposed, Afrocentricity, has become a much more relevant idea than many other viewpoints. Within the paradigm of Afrocentricity, as Ama Mazama called it, there are many theories such as location theory, place theory, centrality analysis, and so forth, but my aim has been to provide the five constituent elements discovered in the creation of the idea as guiding landmarks for the intellectual.

I think it is important to establish that unlike the Negritude Movement (led by Leopold Senghor, Leon Damas, and Aime Cesaire) to which the Afrocentric Movement owes much and to which

it is often compared, Afrocentricity has not been limited to asking artistic questions. Indeed the cultural question as constructed by the Afrocentrists is not merely literature, art, music, and dance, but the entire process by which Africans are socialised to live in the modern world. Thus, economics is a cultural question as much as religion and science in the construction of the Afrocentrist. This is why Afrocentrists tend to pose three sets of questions regarding historical and contemporary societies. How do we see ourselves and how have others seen us? What can we do to regain our own accountability and to move beyond the intellectual and cultural plantation that constrains our economic, political, social, and scientific development? What allied theories and methods may be used to rescue those African ideas and ideals that are marginalised by Europe and thus in the African's mind as well?

There are five principal constituents of Afrocentricity that would distinguish it from any other theoretical viewpoint.

- Afrocentricity asserts that Africans ought to have an intense interest in psychological or emotional location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, ceremonies, and signs. What this means is that the African thinker should be seeking to determine by icon, myth, motifs, symbols, etc., where the person, text, or event is located. Is it a Eurocentric, Asiatic, or Afrocentric phenomenon? Is the person asking the question located in the proper place to ask a genuine question? For example, one could ask a Eurocentric question such as "Is African religion monotheistic or polytheistic?" If one asked such a question in an African situation it would have to be reoriented and interrogated for its location.
- The Afrocentrist should possess a commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, architectural, literary, or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class. There is no field or interest that is without some perspective and the Afrocentrist's

commitment is to discover the proper role of Africa or Africans in all situations involving Africans. A critique of inequality, injustice, marginality or other forms of off-centeredness is certainly in order in this research.

- Afrocentricity insists that there has to be a defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, education, science, and literature. One cannot assume that Africans have not spoken, commented, or acted in all the ways that humans behave in the world of culture, science, and economics. To defend African cultural elements means that we must study African cultures, whether on the continent or in the Diaspora, in order to become expert in our field of inquiry.

- Afrocentricity celebrates "cen-

“Afrocentricity is consequently an innovative understanding of phenomena from the standpoint of African people as agents.”

teredness" and "agency" and activates a commitment to lexical refinement and reconstruction that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people. Nothing pejorative or demeaning to Africans as humans can escape the attention of Afrocentrists. If someone uses the term "tribe" in a negative way or speaks of "minorities" when speaking or writing about African people in the United States or Brazil or anywhere else, that person must be checked, that is, located before you can make a proper assessment of the situation.

- Afrocentricity is a powerful imperative from historical and social sources to revise the collective text of African people. Since so much negativity about Africa has been written over the centuries the Afrocentrist takes the position that

the correcting of the collective text is a vital part of the reformative process of education and the only real way to a truly liberating knowledge. Thus, the Afrocentrist is by definition and activist intellectual, not a public intellectual.

In conclusion, these are the reasonable minimum characteristics necessary for a truly clear view of African phenomena transgenerationally and transcontinentally. Thus, we incorporate the best traditions of the ancestors, the various struggle streams of resistance found on the continent and in the diaspora, and the indefatigable will of African sages. Afrocentricity is consequently an innovative understanding of phenomena from the standpoint of African people as agents. So long as we are afraid of Afrocentricity, even as a word, we will be unable to break the chains of alien cultures that still crush our legs, necks, and brains. ■

#### References and further reading:

- <sup>1</sup> A young and energetic Cheikh Anta Diop, while a student in Paris, wrote an article for the famous journal, *Presence Africaine* in which he asked the question, "When will we be able to speak of an African renaissance?" Diop understood that we could never speak of a renaissance or rebirth of Africa civilization until we returned to our sources and used those guidelines for our way forward.
- <sup>2</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. Chicago: African American Images, 2011, was first published in 1980. The book has sold over 100,000 copies worldwide and gone through four editions. Ama Mazama, ed., *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003 helped to advance the idea among scholars. See Mazama's Mazama, Ama. (2001) *The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions*. *Journal of Black Studies*, 31, 387-405. This is a definitive account of the Afrocentric paradigm with explanations of the critical dimensions and implication of the intellectual idea. Read also Zulu, Itibari M. *Exploring The African Centered Paradigm: Discourse And Innovation In African World Community Studies*. Los Angeles, CA: Amen-Ra Theological Seminary Press, 1999. This is an important work on the Afrocentric paradigm by one of the key intellectual activists in the field. Zulu's book shows that examining the agency and location of African people is useful in African World Community Studies. The book by Toyin Falola, *Africanizing Knowledge*, New York: Taylor and Francis, 2002, is also worth reading.
- <sup>3</sup> Diop, Cheikh Anta. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. New York: Lawrence Hill Press, 1974. Using primary sources gained from his own and others' works, Diop presents a cogent argument for the African origin of civilization. In his discourse he critiques the works of numerous white scholars to demonstrate how their writings often falsified the history of African people. Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, has a powerful introduction on the African beginnings of philosophy.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Bauval and Thomas Brophy, *Black Genesis: The Prehistoric Origins of Ancient Egypt*. Bear and Company, 2011. Bauval and Brophy produced a work of intelligent research based upon their firsthand observation and study of Nabta Playa.
- <sup>5</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa*. New York: Routledge, 2015; Molefi Kete Asante, *African Pyramids of Knowledge*. New York: Universal Write, 2016.