



MOLEFI ASANTE AND THE AFROCENTRIC INITIATIVE: MAPPING HIS INTELLECTUAL IMPACT

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It is always good to honor the honorable, to praise the praiseworthy and to bear witness to the excellence and enduring quality of distinguished work wherever it is done or displayed. So, when I received an invitation to give the keynote presentation at the "Retrospective on the Achievements of Molefi Kete Asante at 65: An Invitational Conference," I prepared my paper; and Tiamoyo and I caught the appropriate plane. And many of Asante's colleagues and former students from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and North America did likewise. For it was not only a gathering to give praise, but to present our work and reaffirm commitment to the Afrocentric initiative which is the foundation and framework for our intellectual and practical projects.

Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, the founding and preeminent theorist of Afrocentricity is one of the most important and influential intellectuals at work today. A professor of African American Studies at Temple University, Asante's academic record reflects a rich array of intellectual achievements and insights expressed in over 60 books, 26 book chapters, 100 plus scholarly articles, a huge number of commentaries, book reviews and research entries, numerous awards, countless professional presentations and several major projects he has conceived and carried out within and for the field of communications and the discipline of Africana Studies. Few scholars have had the kind of intellectual impact on discourse in the academy as well as influence in the larger society and on an international level as he has had. The range and reach of his work is not only evident in the million plus hits one gets in internet searches around the categories Afrocentricity and Afrocentric, but also in the way the category Afrocentricity in its various forms appears in the literature, lives, conversations and projects of scholars, professionals and lay persons alike on both the national and international level.

Asante asserts that his work is "*constructing, enabling and liberating.*" This requires a "*transformative turnabout,*" i.e., "taking the

globe and turning it over so that we see all the possibilities of a world where Africa, for example, is subject not object" and then pursuing these possibilities. This in turn necessitates a radical and even revolutionary dismantling of the European system of discourse and dominance. In a word, he states, "we must breakdown in order to breakthrough."

He begins as a young professor at UCLA in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement, exploring the liberating possibilities in the concept of *nommo*, the Dogon term for the word, as a creative, transformative and sacred power. It is for him a conceptual framework for discussing both the distinctiveness of the African way of speaking and its continuing centrality in African American life, in spite of the Holocaust of enslavement. This pointed toward his later transforming communications into a sub-field in the discipline of Africana Studies and developing a shared vocabulary for both.

Secondly, Prof. Asante brought a new life to Africana Studies with his theory and methodology of Afrocentricity, enriching and expanding discourse and discussion and challenging established order conceptions of the mission and meaning of Africana Studies. He rejects the notion of Black Studies as a mere collection of courses and insists on a rootedness, orientation and methodology that make Africans the subjects and agents of their own history.

Asante, in crafting the conceptual foundations of Afrocentricity, focuses on five central concepts: (1) centeredness in one's own culture; (2) orientation towards the good of one's people and humanity; (3) perspective as an Afrocentric way of understanding and approaching the world from a centered and correctly oriented position; (4) victorious consciousness; and (5) agency, which is the capacity and will to act as self-conscious agents of cultural and social change.

To operationalize Afrocentricity, Asante built the first PH.D. program in African American Studies and directed more than 120 doctorates, including the first Japanese and Chinese graduates in this discipline, reaffirming the

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world-encompassing character of his project and its value as a methodology and model for other cultures and disciplines. Working to further strengthen and map out the terrain and central issues in the field, Prof. Asante has produced several important texts in co-editorship: *Handbook of Black Studies*; *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*; and *African Intellectual Heritage*. He also founded the *Journal of Black Studies*, the preeminent journal of the discipline.

Thirdly, Asante also created an international school of Afrocentric thought, with scholars within the discipline and across discipline lines. To provide space for regular enriching exchanges and presentation of new research, Dr. Asante and his wife, Ana Yenenga Asante, founded the Annual Cheikh Anta Diop International Conference dedicated to building on the work of the Imhotepian Senegalese scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop. Indeed, Asante accepts Diop's conception of ancient Egypt as an essential "source for intellectual and philosophical ideas" and vital to the renewal and forward advance of African culture.

Fourthly, Asante's work gave new intellectual life to the academy, provoking harsh and even hysterical counter criticism by Eurocentric scholars. But it also encouraged an overdue and sorely-needed self-interrogation by the academy in terms of its self-congratulatory narrative known as curriculum, and its Eurocentric ways of understanding and approaching Africans and the world. And it also inspired and cultivated cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary dialog

and discourse. Indeed, as Asante states, "the Afrocentric school of thought becomes useful for the expansion of dialog and widening of discourse, (which is) the proper function of education."

Finally, Prof. Asante's impact is also felt in the larger area of communal and social discourse and practice. Reaching beyond the academy, the concept of Afrocentricity set in motion educational, social, political and human service projects of various kinds. These all testify to the generative nature of his work. Asante also engages in a number of practical initiatives—conducting educational tours to Egypt and West Africa, acting as curriculum consultant for numerous school districts and conducting workshops for teachers in Afrocentric philosophy, methodology and curriculum building. Moreover, he works with numerous national and international organizations including the African Union.

Afrocentricity, he concludes, not only precedes and makes possible intellectual emancipation, but also points towards human emancipation in the fullest and most flourishing sense of the word. Without this cultural centeredness, he says, "we exist in a borrowed space," a space which falsifies our history and fossilizes our thought and practice in a Eurocentric framework. But in our own cultural space, we are able to contribute meaningfully and masterfully in our own terms to the multicultural unfolding and flowering of humanity and human history in collaboration with the other peoples of the world.

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