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Bringing Some Sanity and Humanity to Afrocentricity (a.k.a. Afrocentrism)

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Many Black intellectuals and activists have offered Afrocentric, or African-centered, thought as a cure to much of what ails people of African descent. Afrocentrists believe that ostensibly African culture, history, economics, values, etc. should be at the center of the lives of all people of African descent.

At first sight, this does not seem like such a bad idea. After all, most Whites in the Western world are largely, if not mostly, Eurocentric in their thinking, culture, emphases upon history, etc. Why should people of African descent be any different?

The problem is that much of what passes for Afrocentric thinking is downright bigoted, unscientific, sexist homophobic, and utterly irrational. I started thinking about this topic as a result of a notification in my inbox from the Harlem Humanists. The group invited one Black freethinker to discuss “How to be Afrocentric without drowning in the dogma of Afrocentrism or any other ‘ism,’ including our own.”

Many Afrocentrists have promoted “melaninism” or the belief that the high melanin content in Black people endows us with superior physical and mental qualities. During the 1990s, many “melanin scholars” held conferences throughout the United States.

Frances Cress Welsing, a Black psychiatrist from Washington, D.C., wrote about the supposed power of melanin in an essay from her book *The Isis Papers*. She went so far as to say that George Washington Carver was so successful because the high melanin content in his body enabled him to have a special relationship with plants. What is worse, Welsing wrote about the supposed Uri Geller effect. She stated that the famed Israeli “psychic” Uri Geller had such extraordinary paranormal gifts due to the high level of melanin in his body.

Skeptic James Randi long ago exposed Geller as a fraud on “The Johnny Carson Show,” and even used to give an “award” to other supposed psychics which he called “the Uri,” a trophy in the shape of a bent spoon. (Geller professed to be able to bend spoons with the power of his mind. However, he was secretly using his hand in an old sleight-of-hand parlor trick.)

The idea that melanin has quasi-magical powers probably came from Afrocentrists that misinterpreted the work of the late Senegalese Egyptologist, physicist and multi-genius Cheikh Anta Diop. To help demonstrate the African origin of Egyptian civilization, Diop had mummies tested for their melanin content. Some critics contended that high levels of melanin would be expected to be found in the mummies, regardless of their race. In any case, at no point did Diop contend that melanin had any quasi-magical properties. (For more on Diop, see Ivan Van Sertima’s piece in my book, *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*.)

There have been other pseudo-scientific beliefs among Afrocentrists. For example, some Afrocentrists have contended that the Ancient Egyptians flew airplanes and that they were able to move huge stones for the construction of pyramids via telekinesis. Many Afrocentrists have opposed evolution, claiming that Darwin was racist, as though this charge could in any way invalidate one of the most solidly demonstrated facts in all of science.

However, there have also been far more insidious and invidious ideas among Afrocentrists. Many Afrocentrists have promoted homophobia, angrily referring to gay men as “faggots.” They have never denounced proposed laws among African legislators to persecute and even kill homosexuals. They have demonized Jews and considered women to be sex objects. They have never denounced Female Genital Mutilation, a.k.a., Female Genital Cutting or the persecution of albinos and alleged witches and warlocks in Africa.

It does not have to be this way. One should be able to take pride in things African without feeling obligated to buy into any of the irrational, hateful and pseudo-scientific beliefs of extreme Afrocentrists. Africans have a great history. They have built pyramids, smelted steel, produced great art and music, etc. They have produced attractive clothing and rich and varied cultures. Why cannot these facts be embraced and celebrated without also embracing dangerous nonsense?

Afrocentrists tend to deify everything they believe comes from Africa. In that way, for them, Afrocentrism becomes like a religion. Some of them even use the terms “gods” and “goddesses” to refer to African people.

However, there is nothing divine about Africa, African people, or anyone or anything else. It is always wrong to deify anything or anyone. After all, how can we correct or get rid of irrational and dangerous beliefs if we believe they come from a divine source?

Africans are no more or less human than any other people. We should embrace our humanity and fully, happily and unashamedly embrace the fact that we are of African ancestry. We should celebrate the beauty of our cultures and our history and tell the world about our accomplishments. However, we should never feel obligated to denigrate others to lift ourselves up. After all, as Booker T. Washington pointed out, you cannot keep a man down without staying down with him.