

The Problem with Afrocentricity

Part II

A Book Review

An Afrocentric Manifesto, by Molefi Kete Asante (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007, ISBN – 13: 978-07456-4103-4) 179 pp. Paper \$21.00

Of special interest to humanists is Molefi Kete Asante's claim that Afrocentricity "is opposed to spookism, confusion, and superstition." The use of the word "spookism" grabs attention, because leading Afrocentrist, non-theist and founder of Kwanzaa, Maulana Karenga, once denounced spookism among Africans. Many critics derided him for it, and he has since stayed away from the term.

Like many humanists, Afrocentrists are also highly critical of postmodernism. For Afrocentrists, however, the fact that postmodernism has its roots in Europe is about all it takes to get their harsh critiques and negative comments.

On p. 49, Asante writes that "Afrocentricity is not data, but the orientation to data." This is especially telling. In the 1990s, when Afrocentricity seemed to be everywhere in the mainstream media, melaninism, or the belief that the melanin pigment gave Black people certain biological advantages, was popular among Afrocentrists. When asked what he thought of melaninism, Asante said that he found it "intriguing."

However, there is nothing intriguing about melaninism or any other pseudo-scientific idea. If Afrocentricity had been concerned with data rather than a mere orientation toward it, the belief in melaninism would have never taken root. That is because so-called melanin scholars have never provided any data to support their case. All they have done is make one dogmatic claim after another.

On a similar note, some Afrocentrists have argued that the ancient Egyptians knew about evolution long before Darwin ever came on the scene. What they do not understand is that before Darwin, no one had ever provided *data* to support a detailed theory of evolution. Unlike Afrocentricity, science *is* about the data. Therefore, Darwin received the credit he so richly deserved for his theory.

On p. 29, Asante writes that Afrocentricity "is opposed to radical individualism...." This is all well and good. However, Afrocentrists make no serious intellectual efforts to deal with the tension that inevitably arises in trying to maintain the relationship between the individual and society. For Afrocentrists, the community, or society, always takes precedence over the individual. For that reason, Afrocentrists are not very high on individual rights.

Just as Asante is against sexism in theory, though not necessarily in practice, he denounces homophobia while giving aid and comfort to it. In his book *From Mythology to Reality: Moving Beyond Rastafari*, non-theist Seon M. Lewis discusses Asante's views on homosexuality. He quotes Asante from his book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, as follows: "homosexuality and lesbianism are deviations from Afrocentric thought because they often make the person evaluate his or her own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness." (p. 303 in Lewis' book, and p. 72 in Asante's book.)

Asante continues on p. 73 of his book on Afrocentricity, theory and social change: 'So long as homosexuals' primary definition of self or their most authentic consciousness is homosexuality, they are

outside of the [African] struggle.” (p. 303 of Lewis’ book.) On the same page Asante continues that even if “an Afrocentric perspective recognizes its (homosexuality/lesbian) existence...homosexuality cannot be condoned or accepted as good for the national development of ‘strong people.’” (p. 304 in Lewis’ book.) Finally, on the same page, Asante has this to say: “What is the historical response of African community towards homosexuality? It has been one of toleration but not one of acceptance as a model for relationships.” (p. 304 in Lewis’ book.)

One cannot help but to believe that Asante is being incredibly disingenuous. Asante lived in Zimbabwe where one of his sons was born. He is very familiar with Zimbabwe’s strongman Robert Mugabe, a virulent homophobe who once said that gays are lower than pigs and dogs.

Stemming from colonial times, there are laws against homosexuality in many African nations. Recently, Uganda, Nigeria and other African nations have passed draconian laws against homosexuality. They readily agree with Afrocentrists that homosexuality is un-African.

In Asante’s views on homosexuality, there is no discussion of the role that biology plays in sexual orientation. In the Afrocentric view, there is clearly no concern whatsoever for seriously defending the rights of LGBTQI people, to say the very least. On the contrary, Afrocentrists have no problem whatsoever with sacrificing the rights of LGBTQI people on the altar of African culture. Just imagine if African Americans were to be merely tolerated but not accepted as models for American relationships, or the development of strong people!

Asante claims that Blackness is thematically against all terror perpetrated on any people. Yet not only is terror being perpetrated against LGBTQI people in Africa – with no opposition from Afrocentrists – but there have been many acts of Black-on-Black terror throughout African history. Chaka of the Zulus might have killed as many as 2 million people during his reign of terror. Children have had their limbs cut off in brutal wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. In recent years, genocide or ethnic cleansing has taken place in Rwanda and Burundi. The list is endless.

After all is said and done, Afrocentricity is biased against the West and blindly devoted to even the most negative aspects of African cultures. Its emphasis upon making Blacks subjects rather than objects is to be applauded. However, Afrocentrists are unable or unwilling to truly examine African people in all of their complexity.