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# **Beyond Intellectual Construct to Policy Ideas: The Case of the Afrocentric Paradigm**

by

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## **Abstract**

The Afrocentric paradigm has revolutionized the field of Black studies for the past several decades following scholar Molefi Asante's extensive works on the theory. Many other scholars have since advanced the Afrocentric idea with similar or dissenting views and interpretations. While recognizing the utility of these works in terms of their intellectual engagements with the theory as well as their respective contributions to the field, the literature on the theory does not appear to be endowed with many scholarly works that have explored the policy perspective of the concept. This paper makes the case for the elevation of the concept from the intellectual construct to the policy domain. The paper argues that the underlying tenets of the Afrocentric idea have the ability to redefine the widespread negative portrayal of Black identity through concrete policy ideas and initiatives.

## **Introduction**

The struggles for self-determination in many aspects of life have for centuries occupied the central place within the global African communities. From the struggles against the slave trade and colonialism in Africa, to the struggles for freedom from slavery and institutionalized racism in the African diaspora, to contemporary struggles against negative stereotypes of blackness are just few examples. Beside the different layers of the systemic struggles in the Black world, the intellectual sphere of Black studies in the United States of America (USA), for example, evolved out of many struggles as well (Karenga, 2010). Aside the political, socio-economic and cultural struggles, the pursuit for African-centered ideas and theoretical grounding have gained recognition within the field of Black studies from the 1960s onwards.

This is where scholar Molefi Kete Asante's ideas and pioneering works on Afrocentricity revolutionized the field of Black studies and other allied fields like sociology, education, policy science and history among others. Professor Asante's philosophical ideas on Afrocentricity have been advanced by other scholars with degrees of fluidity in perspectives, interpretations and misinterpretations as Mazama (2001, p.389) has observed. It could be argued that the Afrocentric concept has essentially transformed the study and understanding of the critical issues pertaining to the field of Pan-African studies. As this paper assumes, the intellectual transformation of the field with emphasis on the African-centered perspective is expected to continue for decades if not centuries. While recognizing the usefulness of these works in terms of their intellectual engagements with the theory, the existing literature appears not to have many scholarly works that have examined the policy side of the theory. This explains the rationale for this paper.

In essence, this paper is making the case for an extension of the Afrocentric paradigm to the policy domain. In other words, this paper argues that the relevance of the theory rests on the extent to which the main tenets could be applied to real life situations through policy initiatives. This underlying logic is based on the assumption that the Afrocentric concept has the intellectual capacity (conceptual ideas) to positively redefine and transform the distorted image of African people as well as the ability to shape policy initiatives in the attempt to provide solutions to the critical problems facing the Black world. The research question of interest that emerges is: How relevant is the Afrocentric theory in advancing policy ideas? To explore the above question, the paper has been organized into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the theory while the second part examines the contending issues of the theory. The final part explores the critical problems facing Africa and the African diaspora and makes the case for policy initiatives based on the tenets of the Afrocentric idea.

## **The Afrocentric Idea: An Overview**

The Afrocentric idea by scholar Molefi Asante has for more than 30 years occupied the theoretical epicenter of Black studies and other allied fields. Although the idea of Black identity and self-determination (e.g., political, cultural, socio-economic and psychological) dates back to early thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah and Cheikh Anta Diop among others, Asante's theoretical voyage which produced many works (Asante, 1987; 1988; 1998; 2003) on Black centeredness or Black centrality succeeded in positioning his philosophical ideas on the citadel of the ground-breaking works on Afrocentricity. What then is the concept of Afrocentricity? According to Asante (2003, p.2):

Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena. Thus, it is possible for anyone to master the discipline of seeking the location of Africans in a given phenomenon. In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a troupe of ethics. Thus, to be black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial domination.

Expanding on similar ideas elsewhere, Asante (1991, p.171) contends that the Afrocentric concept constitutes what he describes as a framework of reference where a given phenomenon is viewed and understood through the lens of the African people. In other words, the centrality of the African people (*defined in this paper as Africans on the continent and the African diaspora*) constitutes the heartbeat of the theory. Recchoing Asante's voice on the concept, Mazama (2001, p.388) posits that the Afrocentric idea "rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people" where they can claim their identity and victorious consciousness. Dei (1994, p.4-5) endorses similar perspective and argues that the Afrocentric school of thought is about the "validation of African experiences and histories, as well as a critique of the continued exclusion and marginalization of African knowledge systems from educational texts, mainstream academic knowledge, and scholarship."

A careful analysis of Asante's elaborate definition of the concept as other Afrocentric students tend to reveal two important points worth considering. First, that African people have their unique ideas, cultural values, norms and actions that shape their worldview as with other cultures around the world. Second, the understanding that the theory emerged to offer alternative ideas to what Dei (1994) describes as the sustained "exclusion and marginalization of African knowledge systems." M'Baye's (2006) thought on the Afrocentric concept is not too different from other scholars. For him, slavery and colonization not only displaced Africa's human and economic resources to the Western world, but the present conditions of Black people created the incentives for Afrocentric theory to claim "legitimate counter-attacks to Western hegemony" (p.86). Mazama (2001) has similar point of view, but she describes the rationale for the theory's evolution as an attempt to solve a common problem facing people of African descent across the world. For Mazama (2001, p. 387), the problem is the "unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant conceptual frameworks" by African people and the attempt to address this problem is what introduced the Afrocentric idea into the scholarly lexicon.

In fact, Ama Mazama's conceptual lamentation of the invasion of the African cultural values, ideas and identity by European cultural ethos, as Molefi Asante has articulated in his earlier works as other Afrocentric thinkers (Karenga, 2010; Alkebulan, 2007), reminds us of the difficult position/challenges facing Africans and the African diaspora in the contemporary era. Linus Hoskins' (aka Kwame Nantambu) idea on Afrocentricity is similar to the founding idea of Asante, but Hoskins (1992) takes a rather radical approach in defining the concept. For Hoskins (1992), the process of Afrocentricity provides African people the opportunity "to go back to the dawn of human history in order to de-Europeanize/detoxify/demystify/debrainwash their subconscious mind-set of this invisible drug called Eurocentric miseducation....with the correct knowledge, information, and interpretation of the rich, glorious and dynastical history, scientific inventions, humane communal modus vivendi,...and unmatched intellectual acumen of their African ancestors" (p. 252). The apparently tall order for a turnaround mind-set for all people of African descent is of course attainable, but the question of how it could be attained and under what circumstances, and whether the Afrocentric paradigm represents the embodiment of the intrinsic complexities (*history, culture/experiences*) of Africa and people of African descent might be the biggest challenge and source of contentious scholarly debates on the theory.

## **Contending Discourse on Afrocentricity**

Like other theories, the Afrocentric theory is not excluded from multiple voices regarding divergent ideas, views and interpretations. In fact, the evolution and subsequent popularization of the theory continue to generate huge interests in the academia and the popular literature. Mazama rightly summed it up this way. Afrocentricity is widely discussed in many parts of the world because of the way "it has become a formidable Pan-African force that must be reckoned with... and the reasons for its appeal lies both in the disturbing conditions of African people and the remedy that Afrocentricity suggests" (Mazama, 2001, p.387). Whether in the academia or the popular media/literature, the Afrocentric idea continues to generate much enthusiasm to the extent that Karenga (2010) was quick to remind observers about the differences in terminology of the concept. To him, there is a popular version called *Afrocentrism* and the academic version known as *Afrocentricity* or the *Afrocentric theory*. In his words, a clear distinction must be made between the academic conception of the theory and what the popular literature portrays about the theory (Karenga, 2010, p.41). He argues that *Afrocentrism* has often been used by critics and the popular media to either negate or miscast *Afrocentricity*. The purpose, as Karenga (2010, p.41) suggests, is to describe the concept as "an ideological posture rather than an intellectual category." In other words, the decision by the critics to add "ism" to the concept is to place the concept within political/ideological domain rather than the methodological/theoretical sphere with sound intellectual grounding (Karenga, 2010).

Like other conceptual ideas, critics of the theory exist within and outside the discipline. In fact, works by Schlesinger (1991), D'Souza (1995) and Lefkowitz (1996) that have been critical of the theory are very well-known in the literature. Lefkowitz's work, for example, could be described as one of the fiercest, if not the fiercest critic of the theory. Lefkowitz's (1996) central thesis centers on whether ancient Egypt or what is known in the literature as Kemet had any influence on Greek civilization or not. While the debates among historians and classical scholars on who influences who are not likely to end, it is important to recognize the fact that the contributions of ancient African empires to world civilization has either been ignored, distorted, misrepresented or completely reduced to nonentity in world history by Euro-American scholarship (Alkebulan, 2007). Clearly, the idea of African people rediscovering and retelling their lost story through their worldview, as this paper shares, is what the Afrocentric idea underscores.

Aside the external critics, the contending discourse on Afrocentricity has also seen inside the discipline critics, but from a more intellectual perspective rather than ideological as Karenga (2010) has observed. Scholars such as Oyebade (1990) and Adeleke (2009) are few examples. Adeleke's (2009) book is perhaps the strongest critic of the theory so far. Professor Adeleke took issues with the idea of "Afrocentric essentialism" which uses "Africa to advance a monolithic and homogenous history, culture, and identity for all Black people, regardless of geographical location" (p.11). By mythologizing identity, argues Adeleke (2009, p.91), "Afrocentrists were able to impose a unified identity on all Black people, ignoring the multiple complex historical and cultural experiences." Adeleke's (2009) objective, as clearly stated in his current work and future works perhaps, is to offer what he calls "an exposition and critique of the cultural, social, historical, and indentitarian implications of the essentialist tradition in contemporary Black cultural nationalist thought as theorized in Afrocentricity" (p.10). In fact, scholar Adeleke has a point about the likely problem of undermining the complexities of African people by reducing their different cultures, history and experiences to a monolithic construction. This debate is of course not new and neither will it end anytime soon as Afrocentric scholars have been educating many in the West not to see Africa, for example, as a monolithic entity as frequently found in the Western media outlets and scholarly discourses.

While acknowledging the value of Adeleke's caution as well as his persuasive analysis of the monolithic argument, his claim that the concept of Afrocentricity imposes "a unified identity on all black people" might be far-fetched and problematic. Avoiding what could be described as the "monolithic trap," has been discussed by some of the leading apostles of the Afrocentric concept. In fact, Keto (1989, p.17), Karenga (2010, p.43) and Asante (1998; 2003) have made such ideas known in their respective works. As Asante (2003, p.4) notes, there is an *African cultural system* that has manifested in many diverse ways on the continent of Africa, in the United States, Jamaica, Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil and places where Black people are domicile around the world.

Clearly, there is an *African way or worldview* with similar cultural elements and values among Africans and people of African descent that are already known and still being discovered. The extended family system and community-minded practices are some of the common practices among African people across the world (Dei, 2012; 1994; Karenga, 2010). As others will agree, this paper argues that it is the responsibility of Africanist scholars to continue to undertake research that would uncover these common cultural elements and values among the globally dispersed Africans while recognizing their centrality in the analysis of their history, culture and experiences as underscored by the Afrocentric paradigm. It should be noted that the term *Africanist*, as used in this paper, refers to scholars who share the Afrocentric idea since many other scholars who often claim to be *Africanist* tend to share strong Eurocentric views in their analysis of the African phenomena.

As earlier noted, the impact of Afrocentric theory has been phenomenal. In the words of Asante (2003, p. 4), “we have seen the explosion of Afrocentricity in every walk of life affecting African people...The arts, education, architecture, psychology, science, informational technology, symbolism, and religion are just a few of the areas where Afrocentric consciousness has invaded our spaces as measures of recovery.” There is no doubt that the intellectual explosion of the theory has been extraordinary and useful to the field, but this paper argues that the long term impact of the concept can best be sustained if scholars extend the intellectual arm of the theory to the policy domain. This again explains why the paper is making the case for an extension of the theory beyond the intellectual construct to policy ideas in our attempt to redefine and reclaim the otherwise distorted image and the negative misinterpretation of African people worldwide. Before I examine the underlying reasoning for the paper’s *venue shift* argument, it might be useful to briefly reiterate Africa’s glorious historical past. The brief analysis of the historical past is important for three reasons. First, to situate Africa’s past civilizations within a broader context of this essay. Second, it is essential to reinforce the argument that the experiences of African people have not only been characterized by widespread negativity, but also by beauty, creativity and resilience. The third reason is to highlight the consequences of the systematic distortion of Africa’s history, culture and achievements during European colonialism of the continent. The paper will discuss these issues through the lens of two phases (*evolution of the distorted image / struggles for cognitive self-determination*) of African people.

## **The Struggle for Self-Determination: Understanding the Two Phases**

As previously stated, the endless struggles to rewrite and redefine the distorted history, injustices and the widespread negative portrayal of people of African descent continue to engage the attention of many scholars. As known, Africa’s past civilizations were well-established and remarkable. The continent is not only considered as the cradle of humanity, but the place where the earliest human civilization, progress and development started (Karenga, 2010; Shillington, 2012). The empires or civilizations of the Nile Valley like Egypt (Kemet), Nubia, Askum and the Western Sudanic civilizations of Ghana, Mali and Songhai have in their unique ways influenced our modern civilization (Karenga, 2010).

It should be noted that other classical civilizations like the Greek and Roman also have their place in shaping modern civilization, but the narrative about the Greeks and Romans should not be told at the expense of other civilizations. Scholars are certain and quite unanimous about Africa's unique position as the birth place of humanity (Karenga, 2010) or what this paper describes as the "incubator of human civilization." As vital as the rich history is to Africa and the rest of the world, Africa's role in shaping modern civilization has either been distorted, dismissed or completely ignored for centuries. What explains this?

Historian Kevin Shillington's observation might be helpful at this point. According to Shillington (2012), ancient Egyptians invented one of the world's oldest scripts (hieroglyphics) which were used to record their history on papyrus scrolls, walls of temples and tombs. Beside ancient Egyptians (Kemet), Ethiopians (Askum) also recorded many aspects of their history in religious texts, works of literature and other forms of oral tradition as common with other ancient African civilizations (Shillington, 2012). What might be interesting to note, as Shillington (2012) argues, was the rejection of African history by European scholars in the late eighteenth century after the so-called strict rules of evidence and interpretation of history gained popularity in Europe. As Shillington (pp.1-2) notes:

The prevalent belief among European historians of the nineteenth century was that without written records there was no history...They applied this principle to Africa during the period of colonisation from the late nineteenth century and concluded that Africa south of the Sahara had little or no history of significance before the coming of the Europeans...This coincided with their views of racial superiority, which they used to justify their colonial conquests...This racist prejudices seriously impeded the study and writing of African history for at least the next half-century.

The above quotation reveals two significant points worth noting. First, the idea of what constitutes "real history" was geographically skewed and defined within the European context. Unfortunately, the European-driven perspective of historiography was not confined to Europe, but this perspective was used as a methodological tool to study Africa and its people for several decades with no regard to the different culture, history and the methods of recording history across the continent. Second, the product of the externally-driven idea of what constitutes "real history" was the flawed assumption of Africa as having "no history of significance" as Shillington (2012) has clearly stated. Sadly, these incorrect assumptions about the continent by many European historians were not exclusive to the field of history alone, but the idea was extended to the social sciences, even to the present times. It is no wonder that Africa's role and voice in world affairs, for example, continue to be relegated to the periphery in scholarship and global policy issues. A good example might be useful to the discussion at this moment.



As a trained political scientist with focus on international relations, comparative/African politics, the author of this paper is familiar with some of the major scholarly works by leading scholars in the field of international affairs. Apparently, scholar Samuel Huntington happens to be one of those leading scholars whose ideas and influence continue to have lasting impacts in the field of international relations due to what could be described as his compelling “scholarly megaphone.” But Huntington’s uncertainty about the existence of African civilizations (south of the Sahara) as noted in his work on the clash of civilizations is quite revealing. While acknowledging ancient civilizations of Egypt and Ethiopia (*but with little discussion of them*), Huntington’s (1996) ideas on the existence of other African civilizations beside Egypt and Ethiopia were not stated with any element of certainty. In his words, “African (possibly)...most major scholars of civilization except Braudel do not recognize a distinct African civilization. The north of the African continent and its east coast belong to Islamic civilization...Most significantly, European imperialism brought Christianity to most of the continent south of the Sahara” (pp.46-47). He adds, “throughout Africa tribal identities are pervasive and intense, but Africans are also increasingly developing a sense of African identity, and conceivably sub-Saharan Africa could cohere into a distinct civilization, with South Africa possibly being its core state” (p.47).

This paper disagrees with scholar Huntington’s apparent endorsement of the so-called “major scholars of civilization” except Braudel, who refused to recognize African civilizations (beside Egypt and Ethiopia) that have existed on the continent (south of the Sahara) of Africa. Civilizations such as the Nubia, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Ashanti, Dahomey and the Zulu are few examples of the great African civilizations that have existed (south of the Sahara) and recognized by leading scholars like Keto (1989), Karenga (2010), Asante (2003) and Shillington (2012). In fact, Huntington (1996, p.43) has himself reminded readers of what civilizations entail. To him, civilizations are frequently characterized by “broadest cultural entity of villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups.” Like Europeans, Chinese and other past civilizations, common elements of the African culture, values and religious practices as well as their views on how the world works (*e.g., family, community and the cosmos*) existed across different cultures on the continent in spite of the multiple ethnic groups and languages (Karenga, 2010; Dei, 2012; 1994).

As a result of these scholarly imbalances that have characterized the study of Africa and people of African descent for several decades, it is not surprising that many Africanists (scholars, activists, scholar-activists and ordinary people) have been engaged in struggles of many forms to help redefine the distorted and misrepresented history of the past. Clearly, the preceding discussion of the first phase has shown the evolution of Africa’s distorted image and history. It also provides a good understanding of the historical injustices like slavery and colonialism and the efforts made by nationalist leaders (*e.g., Kwame Nkrumah*) in the struggles for independence during the 1950s and 1960s (Kumah-Abiwu and Ochwa-Echel, 2013).

The second phase of the struggle deals with the ongoing efforts to redefine the distorted image, widespread negative stereotypes, racial and social injustices that continue to face people of African descent. In fact, the recognition of these challenges received a recent global attention when the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared 2015-2024 as the *International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD)*. As the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon has observed, “we must remember that people of African descent are among those most affected by racism...Too often, they face denial of basic rights such as access to quality health services and education” (UN-DPI, 2015). The seemingly never-ending problems facing people of African descent are not only daunting, but the desire to change the scholarly landscape where scholars can intellectually interrogate, explore and better understand these problems through the African worldview have been questioned, ridiculed or challenged within and outside the field of Black studies.

The most difficult part of the challenge is at the cognitive level. This is what Mazama (2001) describes as the unconscious adoption of European values by people of African descent to the point where their African identity is disappearing. What is needed, as this paper proposes, is a *cognitive self-determination* of African people from the European-centered ethos. On the contrary, a cognitive self-determination could be difficult to attain if the intellectual engagements with the issues that affect African people are examined outside their frames of reference. This explains why the Afrocentric idea which underscores the centrality of putting people of African descent as active agents and not passive participants in dealing with issues that affect them is important. At the same time, it is imperative to note that the African-centered perspective with emphasis on the centrality of African people is not to advocate for Afrocentric hegemony. Keto’s work on African-centered perspective has addressed the hegemonic dilemma. On Keto’s (1989) part, “the lure of hegemony is not only a temptation to Europe centered scholarship. The Afrocentric perspective can also carry hegemonic undertones when all claims to progress in all regions of the world are explained in terms of the African presence and the African presence alone” (p.17). This could also lead to what I will term as “intellectual isolationism.” This paper shares the dilemma on the hegemonic enticement and admonishes the cross-fertilization of ideas from other perspectives and orientations including the European or Asian, but in the spirit of mutual respect and recognition of the different viewpoints.

The African identity has suffered a great deal of damage and continues to suffer to the extent where social re-engineering through the African-centered perspective is needed more so now than never before. As Asante (1990, p.6) has pointed out, Afrocentric scholars must “seek to uncover and use codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, myths, and circles of discussion that reinforce the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data.” As earlier noted, the intellectual construct of the theory has been valuable, but the time has come to explore the policy ideas as well.

## Beyond Intellectual Construct to Policy Ideas

As revealed in the previous discussion, the real challenge facing African people relates to their cognitive self-determination from the Eurocentric influence. Thanks to Asante's works that have resurrected the centrality of African people and their identity. Clarke (1994) has applauded the pioneering works of Asante, but disagrees with his use of the term Afrocentricity instead of Africentricity. Nevertheless, Clarke has recognized the importance of Asante's persuasive theoretical knowledge in the field. According to Clarke, Asante "has given us a good analysis of what he calls Afrocentricity....He had done the spade work so that a different kind of scholar will come later and take it a step further" (p.113).

Clarke's observation is not only true, but it reminds us of the common African proverb which says that *knowledge is like the baobab tree that one person cannot embrace it with both arms* (Grant and Asimeng-Boahene, 2006). From a theoretical standpoint, one could argue that the *baobab tree* was initially embraced by scholar Asante, but the arms of other scholars are needed to extend his theoretical ideas around the big tree and beyond. This is where the policy perspective of Afrocentric theory, as this paper is advancing, becomes clearer. The key questions of interest are: What is the policy significance of the Afrocentric theory? And how will the core ideas of the theory shape policy outcomes, especially outcomes that will positively transform the distorted image, identity and dignity of African people? The next part of the paper explores the dynamics of these questions.

The importance of translating theoretical concepts into policy ideas for the public good is not new to the Black studies literature. In fact, the idea of integrating theoretical concepts with community engagements (policy-focused) or activist-intellectual activities as Karenga (2010, p.7) describes the idea, have been one of the central pillars in the evolution of the field of Black studies. Scholar-activists have for decades been involved in translating Black political and social thoughts into active community organizing and nationalist movements for the greater good of the African world. But works on this subject matter are not adequate as expected. Nonetheless, it is gratifying to note the emergence of a similar idea (*policy perspective of Africana theories*) in recent years. The Africana Cultures and Policy Studies (ACPS) is a good case in point. Thanks to scholars like Zachery Williams, Robert Smith, Babacar M'Baye, Seneca Vaught and Tim Lake among others, who have energized the debate on the policy perspective of Africana theories. This school of thought, which Williams (2009) describes as "an interdisciplinary field of study" (p.1), is not only timely, but it is likely to transform the field of Black studies in two ways. First, because of the worsening socio-economic problems facing countries and communities in the African world, a growing demand for a policy perspective of Africana theories will be expected from scholars. Second, the ACPS' objective of relocating and synthesizing policy-derived research from different cultural spheres is also expected to create multiple venues for policy ideas and initiatives in the field (Williams, 2009).

Drawing on similar ideas on integrating conceptual scholarship with critical policy issues facing the global African communities, I argue that the tenets of the Afrocentric concept could be useful in developing policy initiatives that will reshape the existing conditions of African people. Some of the existing issues of concern, as defined in this paper, deal with the critical issue of reclaiming the Black identity from European cultural dominance. Mazama's (2001) description of the common identity problem (*unconscious adoption of Western worldview*) facing African people is important to be reiterated at this point. The *common problem argument* raises further key question worth considering. A key question like: What could be done to redefine and reclaim the distorted history/image of African people? As previously noted, the Afrocentric idea has been successful in creating the intellectual space and consciousness of the African worldview as scholars continue to explore answers to the above question. Notwithstanding, this paper is of the view that the next generation of Afrocentric scholars need to integrate or better put, extend the theoretical construct of the Afrocentric idea to engage with policy-relevant research works.

## **African-Centered Pedagogy**

The design of an African-centered pedagogy could be a good starting place in many parts of the global African communities. Actually, the idea of integrating the Afrocentric perspective into curriculum development is not new to the literature. Scholars such as Asante (1991), Schiele (1994), Dei (1994), Mutisya and Ross (2005), Shockley (2010), Mazama and Lundy (2012) have advanced similar ideas in their works. What is common with these works is the recognition that an African-centered curriculum is capable of positively shaping the learning outcomes of students, especially Black students living in Western societies. In his work on *The Afrocentric Idea in Education*, for example, Asante (1991) underscores the need to integrate African-centered curriculum in the public school system. Drawing on Woodson's classic work, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Asante (1991, p. 170) emphasized the transformative purpose and power of education. To him, "education is fundamentally a social phenomenon whose ultimate purpose is to socialize the learner...and schools are reflective of the societies that develop them." In such a socialization process of learning in a multicultural society like the United States, a systematic integration of an alternative approach of knowing, in this case the Afrocentric perspective, at all levels of the educational system should have been the normal practice. On the contrary, the dominance of the Eurocentric perspective or the "Euroamerican hegemonic discourse," as Dei (1994, p.5) describes it has been the norm for centuries.

While this paper acknowledges the importance of broadening the scope of multicultural education, especially with the design of curricula/pedagogy in the school system, it might be desirable to move beyond the broad fundamentals of multiculturalism to specific perspectives like the Afrocentric perspective. But the complexities involved in achieving this goal can also be daunting. Regardless, this paper believes that the complexities could be surmountable with the following policy ideas and recommendations.

First, as very well-known, most public institutions of higher learning in the US have departments or programs of African-American or Black studies with robust African-centered curricula. Similarly, Black cultural centers are also common in many of these institutions with active African-centered social and academic programming. As others have suggested, this paper shares similar views on the need to establish networks of alliance between departments and/or programs of Black studies with local public school districts in the design and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Allied fields such as sociology, women studies, education and policy studies that offer courses on culture, race, urban affairs and policy issues should be included in the partnership. With reference to Black studies departments with existing community-centered networks/programs, it is recommended that these existing networks (e.g., public schools) should be formalized. Once trust is built and cemented, it is expected that local public schools will be more open to adopting culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy in the school system.

Two reasons account for this policy-focused suggestion. First, as known, the decision-making process on school curricula is decentralized with active local involvement in the running of public schools across America. It is also apparent, as this paper observes, that the ability of marginalized groups to effectively shape the direction of educational policy outcomes, especially on culturally relevant pedagogy, are very likely to be minimal following the under-representation of these groups in the decision making process on local school boards. Second, there is also a growing awareness of the importance of integrating culturally relevant contents in the design and implementation of curricula in local public schools in recent years (Larson-Billings, 1995; Howard, 2003). Given the nature of the two scenarios as described above, I argue that one best way that ideas on culturally relevant pedagogy could converge into desirable policy outcomes rests on the collaborative efforts (built on trust) between Black studies departments/programs and local school boards. This trust, I suggest, could easily translate into meaningful policy initiatives in meeting the culturally relevant needs of Black people and other minority students in the school system.

George Dei's extensive works on Afrocentricity and public education offer support for my suggestion. In his work on the concept of Afrocentricity and the dynamics of inclusive curriculum in Canadian schools, Dei (1996) argues that African-Canadian students, as the case with a number of Black students in America, continue to face challenges in the pursuit of their education due to the dominance of Eurocentric contents in the curricula of schools. In most cases, as other works have revealed, students find it hard to culturally relate to subjects being taught or discussed (Howard, 2003). Even if their culture and historical events are discussed, as Dei (1996) laments, the narrative is often centered on the subjugation of their existence and the devaluing/de-privileging of their histories and ancestral knowledge in much of the Eurocentric-driven scholarship (p.171).

What is needed, as Dei (1996) has suggested, is the creation of new forms of culturally relevant pedagogy across the Euro-Canadian/American school systems to help facilitate inclusive learning where Black students in particular can discover the positive values associated with their African history and culture. But critics of this idea will be quick to point out how Black history and culture could help improve the academic performance of students in mathematics or the sciences. Dei (1996) has provided some compelling answers to the above question worth noting. For him, students from minority groups, especially Blacks, are more likely to be engaged in a learning process if they can relate to the subject matter being taught as typical with other racial groups. Thus, when Black achievements in the areas of science, mathematics, social sciences or the humanities/literary works occupy central places in the design and implementation of school curricular, performance is more likely to improve (Dei, 1996). Similar ideas have been advanced in the works of Larson-Billings (1995), Milner (2011) and Howard (2003).

What is clear from the preceding discussion is the fact that many scholarly works have underscored the centrality and value of culturally relevant pedagogy in the education of minority students, especially Blacks. Ladson-Billings (1995) best summarizes the culturally relevant idea by indicating that it is just “a good teaching” for the incorporation of culturally relevant pedagogy in schools. What is unclear, on the other hand, is the question of why some schools are slow or unwilling to embrace “good teaching” through culturally relevant pedagogy. The answer to this dilemma is not only complex, but the attempt to answer it is certainly beyond the scope of this study. Notwithstanding, some of the complex causes the existing literature underscores are systemic/community and historical/contemporary. What this study attempts to accomplish is to explore the extent to which the ideals of the Afrocentric perspective could be useful within the policy domain. This is where the paper shares the views of others who are advancing the idea of collaborative efforts between departments of Black studies and local school districts in promoting culturally relevant curricula/pedagogy in the US school system.

Another policy idea this paper is advancing in the attempt to integrate or shift the intellectual construct of the Afrocentric theory into the policy-focused domain deals with how Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) can effectively experiment and translate the underlying tenets of the theory (Afrocentricity) into concrete policy ideas/options in different fields of study. As the literature reveals, HBCU’s have been the cornerstone of higher education for many African-Americans for several decades (Allen, 1992; Kim and Conrad, 2006). Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the enrollment of Black students at HBCUs was more than ninety percent (Kim and Conrad, 2006). Despite the challenges facing HBCUs, many continue to represent the consciousness of Black people or African-centered identity and autonomy in providing opportunities for higher education and the space for self-expression. In essence, HBCUs, as this paper argues, occupy a unique position in terms of their intellectual autonomy. I call this unique position of HBCUs’ as “self-governing laboratories” which could be used to experiment with relevant policy ideas on the Afrocentric theory.

For example, HBCUs, as previously noted, have African-centered curricula/pedagogy, but mostly in the social sciences and humanities. What this paper is advocating, as equally stated by Molefi Asante (see Zulu, 2008) is for the next generation of Afrocentric scholars to find ways of incorporating the Afrocentric idea into their research undertakings in fields like economics, astronomy and health sciences among others. The question of interest becomes: What is the African worldview when it comes to economics, politics, health or environmental issues? This can be done when a systematic educational strategy/policy (*incorporating the Afrocentric concept*) is developed in institutions of higher learning across the African world on these issues. This is where HBCUs, colleges and universities in Africa and other places in the African diaspora become essential in playing the leading role on these issues. Once developed and properly implemented, the Afrocentric idea could produce policy-focused research which will be helpful in improving the human condition in the African world.

As noted, the underlying assumption of this paper is to challenge Afrocentric scholars to shift the venue or at best, integrate policy perspectives of the Afrocentric theory in exploring how these policy ideas can help reduce the numerous problems facing the African world. Whether in Africa, United States, Canada, Europe, Caribbean or South America, African people continue to suffer from high poverty, general lack and deprivation. How long will these sufferings continue? Two points must be underscored here. First, as revealed in the literature, people of African descent need to reclaim their identity and human dignity and the liberty to explore and understand their unique world through their own lens and filters. This intellectual agenda has for several decades occupied the scholarly universe of Molefi Asante and other faithful students of Afrocentricity. Second, given the fact that the conceptual foundations of Afrocentricity have been laid, one could argue that the time to move beyond the intellectual construct to policy perspective regarding the theory is now. Of course, the argument of this paper is not to advocate for a total neglect of the conceptual elements of the theory.

The central argument in this paper is therefore clear and simple. It is the argument that scholars should engage the African-centered theories, especially the Afrocentric theory through policy ideas and real world applications. In other words, this paper argues that scholarly works on Africans and people of African descent, especially works that integrate the Afrocentric concept should be guided by two principal questions. First, how could the core tenets of the theory be useful in shaping policy ideas/solutions to the socio-economic problems facing communities in the African world? Second, how could the ideas of the theory be applied in teaching and the interpretation of concepts in the general sciences, technology, mathematics and other fields? For this paper, as other observers will agree, the above questions will probably constitute some of the critical issues for the next generation of Afrocentric scholars. As Molefi Asante and other disciples of the theory like Ama Mazama and George Dei have noted, the Afrocentric idea is about liberating African people from the Eurocentric influence that have saturated many aspects of the African culture, life and scholarship.

Regarding the theory's future, Dr. Asante actually brought similar ideas to the fore when he was interviewed by Itibari M. Zulu some few years ago. When asked, for example, about the future themes, concepts and research questions that are likely to engage the attention of scholars in the field of Africology, Asante notes that the future ideas on the Afrocentric ideology will focus on "location, dislocation, orientation, centeredness, and agency" (Zulu, 2008, p.82). As philosophical as his answers might appear, Asante enhanced the discourse by posing further questions he believes would be asked by the next generation of Afrocentric thinkers. Questions like: "How do you interpret economics from an Afrocentric perspective? Is it possible to view an African or African-American culture as the key to economics, for example, relationships? What are the implications of agency for inter-African relationships? How can we reinvent African diasporic history in the light of the narrative told by Africans themselves?" (Zulu, 2008, p.82). On a related question on how Afrocentric scholars can balance their training in the social and other sciences with their interest in Afrocentric-inspired research, Asante argues that emerging Afrocentric scholars do not have to lose interest in their fields of training, but they must discover another method or simply put, employ the African-centered perspective in explaining their research activities (Zulu, 2008), especially on topical issues relating to African people. It is clear that Asante's projections for the theory's future appear to be consistent with this paper's underlying assumptions on the policy perspective of the theory.

As revealed, the fluidity of the concept in terms of its applicability to different fields of study should ignite deeper interest from scholars, particularly those with strong research focus on people of African descent. Within the context of this elasticity, this paper argues that scholars, educators and administrators in HBCUs across the US and other institutions of higher learning in the African world should initiate deeper engagement within their academic environments on the integration of the Afrocentric theory into policy-relevant research, regardless of the field of discipline. Apparently, the African diaspora seems to be advancing the Afrocentric idea very well through teaching and scholarly publications across colleges and universities, especially in the US. The African continent, on the hand, appears to be lagging behind in the promotion of the Afrocentric concept. As Dei (1996, p.170) has recounted his frustrations with the dominance of Eurocentric pedagogy in African schools even after colonialism ended, this author's educational experience on the continent was not different from Dei's experience. Simply put, I was not taught or exposed to the Afrocentric idea throughout my educational years on the continent. This paper is therefore calling on African universities and educational ministries to initiate new policies (curricula of schools) with focus on the Afrocentric paradigm.



## Redefining the African Image and Identity

As clearly argued, innovative policy ideas based on the Afrocentric theory is capable of improving the human condition around the African world, but the collective consciousness of African people can be beneficial and meaningful to victory (Asante, 1998, p. 38-39) through cognitive freedom. To enhance the meaningful victory, it is vital to gain cognitive independence through the process of redefining the African identity. While the redefinition process has often been the challenging part of the struggle, I argue that the conceptual ideas of the Afrocentric theory constitute a useful framework that could be employed in redefining the African image and identity. Let's draw on Asante's idea about the totality of the concept to advance the argument on the African image and identity. In his words, "Afrocentricity is a transforming agent in which all things that were old become new and a transformation of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior result"(1998, p.2). Asante's assumption on the transforming force in which "all things that were old become new" is extremely important as the first step toward the cognitive freedom.

The question of how this freedom could be attained constitutes the next layer of this paper's analysis. Let's start with the *African image* with particular reference to the continent of Africa. As widely known, the continent and its people have been negatively portrayed in the Western media as well as the scholarly literature for centuries. From derogatory depiction of the continent as a "dark continent" during the colonial era to contemporary description of Africa as "third world," or "least developed" region of the world. Keto (1989) did express disdain for such depictions. For him, the idea of the so-called "third world people" can place particular people and regions of the world into dependent characterization or peripheral relationship often "predicted on poverty, low economic performance, low per capita income and unfavorable health statistics" (p. 19). Strangely, some African academics, government/private institutions and media houses are not excluded from depicting the continent in similar ways. It is also not uncommon, for example, to see African people themselves advertising the continent and its people with pictures of *safari settings* often characterized by animals and half-naked Africans in their attempt to promote the "exotic places of interest" for foreign tourists. Unfortunately, these depictions are not different from the depictions of Western entities about the continent. From a policy standpoint, this paper recommends the following to help correct the negative depictions.

1. National governments in Africa should initiate social campaign to discourage the use of "exotic images" in depicting the continent as a tourist destination. A positive imaginary of Africa should be reinforced and promoted. This applies to people of African descent in the diaspora as well.
2. The African Union (AU), which serves as the embodiment of the continent should consider passing a resolution to alert the international community to change its language and terminology from the so-called "third world" or poverty stricken region of the world to a more dignifying description of the continent.

3. Besides the continental resolution, the AU should coordinate with countries in Latin America and Asia to demand similar change of terminology at global venues like the United Nations (UN).

Aside these suggested initiatives on how to redefine and reinforce Africa's positive image from the widespread negativity, it should be noted that the biggest challenge is not necessarily about the external impacts of the negative portrayals of African people, but the devastating consequences of these portrayals on the consciousness of the African identity. For example, the commonly perceived classification of beauty into two categories of white and black, where white or light skin is frequently considered as "good and desirable" and the black or dark skin as "bad and undesirable" continue to damage the self-worth of many, especially women around the African world. As Gooden (2011, p.82) has observed, skin color categorization into "good and bad" has not only elevated lightness over darkness, but these hierarchies of skin color "has assaulted the Black self-concept and encoded people of African descent with this value-laden colonial principle."

The consequences of these dualistic portrayal of beauty (*good and bad*), as Gooden (2011) laments, resulted in some women of African descent using chemicals for skin whitening /lightening (Blay, 2011) or better put, skin bleaching in order to attain the so-called symbol of beauty (Gooden, 2011). Most women of African descent with strong flavors for skin bleaching as others with disdain for their own African identity are caught within a cognitive quandary where they consciously and unconsciously embrace Eurocentric standards of beauty and other desirables while rejecting (consciously and unconsciously) their African identity and heritage. It is therefore the contention of this paper that the Afrocentric idea with emphasis on transforming attitudes, beliefs and behavior (Asante, 1998) within the broader context of the African centrality could help provide new hope and positive image for the African person. With the identity consciousness grounded through multiple venues, one would expect policymakers, politicians, scholars, educators, administrators and ordinary African people to continue to draw more ideas from the Afrocentric concept into concrete policy options in confronting the negative image of blackness and the African identity.

## **Conclusion**

The continent of Africa and the African diaspora have faced many historical problems due to the needless European dominance and influence on the African world for centuries. From the era of slavery and colonialism in Africa, to contemporary problems of underdevelopment, democratization/governance (Kumah-Abiwu, 2011), protracted conflicts, economic stagnation, narcotics trafficking/security challenges (Kumah-Abiwu, 2014a; 2014b) to issues of poverty, racial injustices and the negative stereotypes of blackness in the African diaspora (Karenga, 2010). At the center of these challenges is the debate on how to recapture the disappearing identity, values and norms of African people from the Eurocentric cultural influence.

By responding to the clarion call to help restore the centrality of the African identity, the Afrocentric idea emerged as a leading theoretical concept in the field of Black studies. For several decades, Professor Molefi Asante's works on Afrocentric theory have revolutionized the study of the field. While the contributions of the theory cannot be underestimated, this paper takes the theoretical dialogue to a new level by making the case for scholars to advance the policy perspective of the theory as well. This has been the underlying objective of the paper. By drawing on the central ideas of the theory with persuasive analysis of the contending issues, cases/examples and suggested recommendations on how to translate the theory's tenets into policy ideas, this paper has shown the value of the policy perspective of the Afrocentric theory.

The paper concludes the discussion by reinforcing the argument that the Afrocentric theory has not only enhanced our understanding of the field, but the centrality of the African people in rewriting and interpreting their history from their frames of reference or worldview has been underscored. In essence, Afrocentric theory has the ability to help redefine the negative portrayal of Black identity. Future works should focus on how the theory could be employed with policy ideas to help provide solutions to the challenges facing the African world.

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