THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICOLOGY
An Afrocentric Appraisal

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The scope and purpose of this article is to examine the effectiveness of the discipline of Africology as a holistic academic discipline. Often referred to as Africana studies, African American studies, Afro-American studies, Black studies, and Africology, this exercise of nomenclature can be defined as the study of Africana phenomena from an Afrocentric perspective. While reviewing literature and the current debates in higher education, the author theorized, queried, and critically examined the organizational structure concerning the validity and substantial merit of tenure and promotion, graduation and retention of students, and the advancement of this interdisciplinary matrix of knowledge as an academic agency. Indeed, many detractors have attempted to label and subjugate this academic enterprise in comparison to traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. On the other hand, the emphasis of a hegemonic perspective acknowledges the imposition of external and conflicted cultural perspectives that enable the composition of the creation of a subordinate group status. This article tills the idea of an Afrocentric perspective as an optional viewpoint to describe and evaluate the historical and cultural experiences of Africana phenomena within the interdisciplinary matrix of Africology.

Keywords: Africana studies; Afrocentricity; Black historiography; Africana culture; hegemony

Starting during the early 1980s, numerous academic units of African American studies in institutions of higher education have taken a philosophical shift toward an Afrocentric perspective. The term Afrocentricity, as explained by Molefi Kete Asante (1987), is the most complete philosophical totalization of the African being-at-the-center of his or her existence. It is not merely an artistic or literary movement. Not only is it an individual or collective quest for...
authenticity, but it is above all the total use of method to affect [sic] psychological, political, social, cultural, and economic change. The Afrocentric idea is beyond decolonizing the mind. (p. 125)

Robert Harris (Harris, Hine, & McKay, 1990) codifies this fluctuation as the third stage of development in African American studies. He discusses the chronology and ideological shift by saying,

from about the 1960s to the mid 1980s, was a period of legitimization and institutionalization. Few scholars were prepared to teach African American Studies courses. The shift in perspective from Eurocentricism to Afrocentricism required the recovery, organization, and accessibility of research materials that made black people, their lives, and their thoughts the center of analysis and interpretation. (p. 11)

Harris (1990) substantiates the first stage as having started in the 1890s and continued to the Second World War. The second stage of the development of African American studies that Harris refers to is during the era of Gunnar Mydral’s studies of African Americans. Abu Abarry (1990) has written on the importance of Afrocentric scholarship in this way: “Any meaningful and authentic study of peoples of African descent must begin and proceed with Africa as the center, not periphery; as subject, not object” (p. 123).

Clovis Semmes (1981) sanctions Afrocentricity as a fundamental base for the development and idea of African American studies. He writes, “A basic premise of this analysis is that if one considers logical and empirical categories linked to nascent growth of Black Studies, then Afrocentricism should become the guiding principle of Black studies” (p. 3). Whereas, Alan Colon (1984) pursues this point in greater clarity:

Black studies is the most recent mass expression of a venerable tradition of Afrocentric scholarship among African Americans. This tradition has sought to incorporate scholarly pursuits with (1) the transmission of knowledge relevant to the individual and group achievements of African Americans, (2) the vindication of Black people from scholastic and ideological onslaughts against them, and (3) the creation and application of means for African American group problem solving. (p. 268)
Russell Adams’s (1984) investigation of an African-centered perspective in studying African phenomena is,

The primary purpose of Afro-American/Black American studies consists of the research and institution designed to help change the way people perceive the social world, particularly the aspects of race and the black experience. (p. 201)

African American studies has been contested to redefine itself. Thus, the use of the term *Afro-American studies* is a descriptor that provides no location or cultural linkage. The concept and use of language when discussing categorical issues within the discipline of Africology is important. John Henrik Clarke mentions his reasons for using descriptive terminology to refer to the study of African people, saying, “Africana relates you to land, history, and culture” (Turner, 1984). Moreover, Turner (1984) defines the term *Africana* as the following: “The concept Africana is derived from the philosophy of the ‘African continuum and African constitution,’ which posits fundamental interconnections in the global Black experience” (p. 31).

C. Tsehloane Keto (1989) offers an unoriginal, yet interesting, analysis by pointing out the accomplishments in teaching within the discipline and being grounded from an Africa-centered perspective by citing,

Finally, in arguing the case for an Africa centered perspective of history we also liberate the unwitting intellectual prisoners of “blind universal history” by informing them that what they worship as universal history “is . . . as much a product of the mind of the historian who wrote it as it is the product of the actions of the people who actually lived it.” (p. 6)

For example, the name of the discipline in contemporary times is Africana/Africalogy/Africology. Throughout this essay, I will use the terms *Africology, Black studies, African American studies,* and *Africana studies* interchangeably to refer to the Afrocentric study of African phenomena. Asante (1990) defines Africalogy as “the
Afrocentric study of phenomena, events, ideas, and personalities related to Africa. The mere study of phenomena of Africa is not Africalogy but some other intellectual enterprise” (p. 14).

PROBLEM OF DISCIPLINARY CONCEPTUALIZATION

Accordingly, there are few primary and secondary sources on descriptive and evaluative analyses of African American studies’ units. It is interesting that the main reports published on Afro-American studies were sponsored by the Ford Foundation in 1988 and 1990 and were conducted by African American scholars. These scholars used orthodoxed theories within traditional disciplines to qualify the legitimacy, organizational structure, and scope of African American studies. There materializes a pattern that indicates that scholars who embrace a European hegemonic perspective often have reservations concerning the relevance and significance of Africana studies’ existence in the academy of higher learning. Still, Charles P. Henry (1990) points out how some Whites and neoconservatives are opposed to African American studies, and he dismisses the field as irrelevant in the existence of Black culture and mainstream academic circles.

Consequently, there are African American scholars who have accepted the commonly held academy’s cosmology concerning what is a legitimate and valued discipline. These practitioners acknowledge African American studies as a peripheral area or minor field of study. For example, Martin Kilson (Kilson et al., 1969) from Harvard University criticizes Afro-American studies as a discipline by saying,

When it comes to the problem of the formal academic organization of Afro-American studies programs, the militant advocates of black studies have little to contribute . . . Any black studies program that permitted a student to dabble in all of these disciplines, but to master none of them, would be of little value. Such a student would be a dilettante—pure and simple. (pp. 12-13)
Others are more negative, saying that Black studies as a field of careful investigation and analysis is very different from Black studies as a slogan, an indoctrination procedure, or an escape from hard intellectual tasks to loose and heady rhetoric. But Kilson has no record of participation in the professional organizations of Black studies.

Unfortunately, much of the scholarship on African American studies has been conducted by scholars outside the field. Their findings are likely limited by using conventional theories in their examination of African phenomena. Scholars from other fields of study who employ traditional research tools often seem limited in their examination of African phenomena. One could argue that scholars reflecting an Aryan hegemonic worldview are not in a viable position to study such programs.

This is important when we discuss African American studies as a discipline. The purpose of African American studies is a key proponent in examining the problems of the African diaspora. It is also key in attempting to solve problems through theory and practice. This means that an Afrocentric perspective of studying humanity is not hegemonic but an alternative view.

The selection of appropriate personnel in the field of African American studies is still a dilemma. Scholars recognize the importance and need for the commonality in the school of thought among practitioners in the discipline of Africology. Many of these scholars from traditional disciplines start from the assumption that the traditional discipline is primary and the study of African phenomena is peripheral to Western scholarship and intellectual life. This mindset endorses a marginal academic commitment to Africology. In some cases, administrative leadership and faculty appointments in Africology have relied solely on race. Often the issues of theory and historical consciousness have been ignored.

The grounding of scholars sustains the validity for the idea of a discipline. Asante (1990) discusses the issue of grounding and the shape of the discipline of Africology, focusing on the commonality in the philosophical orientation of practitioners by writing,
Centrism, the groundedness of observation and behavior in one’s own historical experiences, shapes the concepts, paradigms, theories, and methods of Africalogy. In this way, Africalogy secures its place alongside the other centric pluralism without hierarchy and by a commitment to centering the study of African phenomena and events in the particular cultural voice of the composite African people. Furthermore, it opens the door for interpretations of reality based in evidence and data secured by reference to the African world voice. (p. 12)

Asante locates an alliance between systematic Africology and an Afrocentric perspective. From the inception of the field in the 60s, scholars located in traditional disciplines qualified African American studies more as elective studies rather than a rigorous discipline. Asante’s (1987) position is that this body of knowledge grew out of a unique perspective and the grounding of an authentic retention of African culture. It is important that one should acknowledge the connection between scholars who embrace and use Afrocentric theory in the discipline of Africology. On the issue of praxis and theoretical commonality, William Nelson (1989) cites Somit and Tanenhaus’s writing in stating, “A learned discipline is characterized by a common state of mind.” This statement qualifies an Afrocentric perspective to be a prism to examine African phenomena in the discipline of Africology. These are some points of inquiry that are applicable to African American studies. James Stewart (1984) acknowledges the growth and maturity of Black studies:

Academic disciplines or enterprises develop a research program or paradigm as they mature. Key elements of a paradigm are exemplars that illustrate the conceptual foundations of the field of inquiry. Often these exemplars incorporate a review of the historical development of the enterprise, with illustrations of the incremental contributions made to the refinement of the conceptual core by successive practitioners building on earlier efforts. Over the past decade and a half, Black studies as an academic enterprise has matured rapidly. Much of this maturation has been involuntary, however, constituting a response to continual external threats to its
existence. In other words, in the same sense that a child must
develop survival skills and adaptive capacities more rapidly in hos-
tile as opposed to nurturing environments, Black studies has been
forced to bypass its adolescent stage. (p. 296)

Thus, Africology framed as a discipline is not an aggregation of
courses about African people crosslisted throughout the social sci-
ences and humanities. In fact, Africology is a holistic discipline
with an Afrocentric philosophy, ideology, and paradigm for critical
study. Although Harris et al. (1990) show the duality of Africana
studies, he does not identify a theoretical base to examine African
phenomena. Asante (1990) points out that Africology is not to be
confused with political science, history, or sociology but is a disci-
pline grounded in the Afrocentric approach to examining human
knowledge from an African-centered perspective.

AFRICOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE

The concept of African American studies as a discipline is cen-
tered on two factors, namely autonomy and the theoretical school
of thought among the scholars in the field. This is essential in
acknowledging those scholars within and on the margins of Afri-
cology. One of the drawbacks confronting the discipline is the
availability of trained faculty. On this issue, the National Council of
Black Studies (Little, Crosby, & Leonard, 1981) reported,

Many (or perhaps most) scholars who entered the field of Black
Studies had little substantive knowledge about the African world
experience. Their primary academic training was in one of the tradi-
tional disciplinary fields (i.e., Political Science, History, Education,
Psychology, Philosophy, Sociology, Economics etc.). An observed
weakness is that individuals trained in a specific discipline become
wedded to particular theories and approaches. Thus, they perceive
some frameworks and approaches as superior to others, and are
unable to appreciate the limitations of those ideas. (pp. 1-2)

The scarce pool of trained faculty in African American studies has
ensued into a scenario whereas scholars have training in traditional
disciplines but no commitment to an alternative epistemology. Distinctively, these faculty acknowledge themselves as experts in the field. Ironically, these pedagogues have dubiously empowered themselves to authenticate Africology. Adversely, their analysis is not drawn from research but more postured in rhetorical commentary. This issue has escalated into discourse on whether conventional liberal arts theories can be used to probe African phenomena from a primary reference point of understanding the culture and interaction of a people. Repeatedly, this can be a problem. I am using the Afrocentric theory of systematic Africology as an alternative to examining African phenomena. These issues are at the cutting edge of examining women’s and multicultural studies as well as Africology. This procures the point of whether it is applicable and correct to use ideas that discuss race, gender, and class interchangeably, whereas interdisciplinary inferences are made that Africology is the contemporary apolitical dimension of Marxism or women’s studies. There may be some mere similarities while being recognized as a discipline in institutions of higher education; nevertheless, they are different and the aforementioned do not start in the hierarchy over Africology. Nor is Africology a reverse hegemonist perspective of examining human phenomena.

AFROCENTRIC SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

A number of scholars such as James Stewart, Delores Aldridge, Gerald Davis, Julius Thompson, and Shawn Donaldson, just to name a few, have made everlasting contributions to the discipline of Africana Studies. Admittedly, Molefi Kete Asante has made a significant contribution to the discipline of Africology. His book, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, provides theoretical and practical applications of Afrocentricity to the lives of African Americans. Asante (1980) posits thought on the essential grounds of a philosophical interpretation of transforming reality for Africans by making them the centerpiece of human regeneration. This book is integral to the scholarship on African American studies because Asante discusses the rationale, relevance, and significance
of examining African culture from an Afrocentric perspective, as well as the approach of understanding African phenomena using alternative research tools of content analysis to measure culture and the retention and survival of culture under the scope of Africalogy.

The two other books written by Asante are *The Afrocentric Idea* and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*. To understand fully the literature in the discipline of Africology, one must start with the introductory texts and then gradually work up to the advanced readings. This is the case with *The Afrocentric Idea*. This advanced book blends social behavioral sciences and cultural aesthetics from an Afrocentric perspective. Asante critiques the Western intellectual community’s contribution to human knowledge, concentrating on rhetoric, logic, and reasoning. Asante (1987) presents the Afrocentric perspective as an alternative cosmology that critiques a Eurocentric hegemonic ideology in the social sciences, professions, and humanities. In fact, he points out that those thinkers who have been acknowledged and have delighted us through the advancement of their scholarship and activism have been the individuals who have explored different views and presented new perspectives of examining human phenomena.

In *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*, Asante (1990) again has worked at an advanced stage in offering a systematic Africological examination in using Afrocentric theory with alternate methods of examining African phenomena. For example, he illustrates the uniqueness, rigor, creativity, and holistic dimensions of the Africologists’ approach to conducting research by saying,

> The Afrocentrist seeks 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. Such a method appears to go beyond western history in order to re-value the African place in the interpretation of Africans, continental and diasporan. (p. 6)

This is illustrated in the formulas that identify paradigms and principle issues of inquiry to examine and evaluate human phenomena. Thus, this is not a monolithic module for measuring African phenomena, but it is an alternative model. Asante has offered a founda-
tion and rationale to critique and raise inquiry concerning reconstruction and transformation in studying African phenomena. He has offered creative and innovative methods of examining African phenomena in the social and behavioral sciences and the cultural aesthetics.

William Nelson’s (1989) research report essay titled, “Africology: From Social Movement To Academic Discipline,” offers a copious and thorough descriptive examination of the discipline of Africology. Nelson examines the issue of commonality in the theoretical orientation of scholars in the discipline. He touches base on the issue of Africology being a discipline that grew out of the 60s but is credited by the efforts of precursors such as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and Charles Harris Wesley. This report essay discusses how this discipline is in a stage of maturation concerning curriculum shape and theory development. Overall, this essay is a major contribution to the field of Africology. Nelson has discussed the ontological base of Africology from the 1960s and evaluated the academic and intellectual connection with traditional disciplines. From this point, he has set the scenario for uncovering the rationale and significance for Africology being acknowledged as a holistic discipline by stating,

An appropriate paradigm for Africology must also combine self knowledge and self realization with social action. In contrast to the parochial, self limiting practices of traditional disciplines, Africology must move its boundaries beyond the borders of academia and begin to register a concerted impact on the broader community. Africology must symbolize not only the search for a new discipline but a new community of political activists. . . . As a discipline, Africology must also develop multiple avenues for communicating its accomplishments to the outside world. (pp. 24-25)

CONCLUSION

One of the challenges that await forthcoming scholars in the discipline of Africology will be the common mindset of scholars. What will this mean for those practitioners in the social sciences
and humanities who have been trained in traditional disciplines and use conventional theories? This question can be addressed in two points. First, it will be essential for Africologists to stand in the vanguard for the advancement of Africology as a discipline; this will illustrate the transformation from traditional disciplines to a holistic body of knowledge. Stewart (1987) examines the necessity of a committed constituency of scholars:

Even a free standing academic unit with appropriately trained faculty is not sufficient condition for the perpetuation of Black Studies. A necessary condition is a campus based and non-campus based constituency that serve as a watchdog against attacks. (p. 9)

Second, there are those scholars who will not be willing to make this transformation and may find themselves outside the discipline and dependent on traditional fields of study. Perhaps there will emerge a new and growing constituency of scholars who will be committed to making a scholastic contribution to the advancement of humanity. The Afrocentric scholar will have to accept the challenge of using theory and practice in pursuit of truth, knowledge, and reality.

Yosef ben-Jochannan (1980) points out that departmentalization is Eurocentric. Africology as a discipline requires knowledge in concentrated areas such as the social and behavioral sciences and the cultural aesthetics in examining African phenomena from an Afrocentric perspective. It is likely that Africologists will be in the forefront of academia in reconstructing and rewriting world history. The conclusions of this essay support the establishment and the development of independent Afrocentric schools on the levels of elementary, secondary, and higher education. The consistent struggle for departments awarding Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy degrees will produce a new scholar and a substantive body of knowledge. This promotes the discipline of Africology in redefining and reaffirming the political, social, and economic position of Africans throughout the global world. The concept of human possibility to think independently is just one of the many solutions for Africans throughout the diaspora to liber-
ate themselves mentally, physically, and spiritually. Akbar (1987) expounds on this issue:

One of the persisting difficulties facing African American people is the difficulty to think independently. We are constrained by the perception that thinking and ideas are the exclusive privilege of those who are similar to the image of divinity. Our scholars are limited to imitating the scholarship of independent Caucasian thinkers. We analyze our situation and the nature of the world in general, exclusively from the frame of reference of Euro-Americans. (p. 63)

In addition, Lerone Bennett (1972) cites how African Americans can bring about radical change for such a transformation by mentioning radical professionals linking up with like minded individuals to form cadre groups with their own means of communication and their own agendas and priorities. These groups could initiate action force and clarify action. They could create alternative structures and transform existing structures. More importantly, they could develop a long range strategy of conscious and antagonistic participation. In general, this means using the legitimacy of the system to delegitimize the system. (pp. 64-65)

The advancement of African American communities and the development of African-centered institutions will serve as a watchdog for the survival and advancement of Black studies.

REFERENCES

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