

НАУЧНЫЕ ШКОЛЫ SCIENTIFIC SCHOOLS

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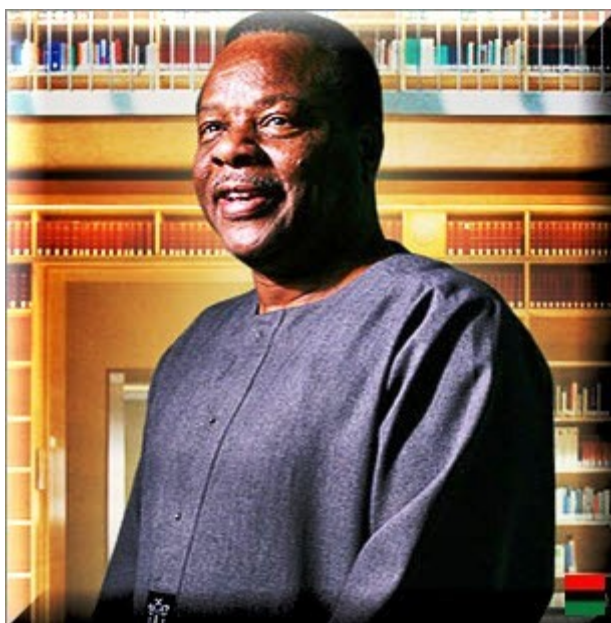
Research article

Afrocentricity as the Organizing Principle for African Renaissance

Interview with Prof. MOLEFI KETE ASANTE, Temple University (USA)

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Abstract. Professor Molefi Kete Asante is Professor and Chair of the Department of Africology at Temple University. Asante's research has focused on the re-centering of African thinking and African people in narratives of historical experiences that provide opportunities for agency. As the most prolific and influential African American scholars and one of the most prolific and influential writers in the African world, Asante is the leading theorist on Afrocentricity. His numerous works, over 85 books, and hundreds of articles, attest to his singular place in the discipline of African American Studies. His major works, *An Afrocentric Manifesto* [Asante 2007a], *The History of Africa* [Asante 2007b], *The Afrocentric Idea* [Asante 1998], *The African Pyramids of Knowledge* [Asante 2015], *Erasing Racism: The Survival of the American Nation* [Asante 2009], *As I Run Toward Africa* [Asante 2011], *Facing South to Africa* [Asante 2014], and *Revolutionary Pedagogy* [Asante 2017], have become rich sources for countless scholars to probe for both theory and content. His recent award as National Communication Association (NCA) Distinguished Scholar placed him in the elite company of the best thinkers in the field of communication. In African Studies he is usually

cited as the major proponent of Afrocentricity which the NCA said in its announcing of his Distinguished Scholar award was "a spectacular achievement".

Molefi Kete Asante is interviewed because of his recognized position as the major proponent of Afrocentricity and the most consistent theorist in relationship to creating Africological pathways such as institutes, research centers, departments, journals, conference and workshop programs, and academic mentoring opportunities. Asante has mentored over 100 students, some of whom are among the principal administrators in the field of Africology. Asante is professor of Africology at Temple University and has taught at the University of California, State University of New York, Howard University, Purdue University, Florida State University, as well as held special appointments at the University of South Africa, Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, and Ibadan University in Nigeria.

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Key words: afrocentricity, Africa, African Americans, African Studies, Africology, afrofuturism, culturalism, poscolonial, decolonial, intellectuals

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Научная статья

Афроцентризм как организационный принцип африканского Ренессанса

Интервью с МОЛЕФИ КЕТЕ АСАНТЕ, профессором Университета Темпл (США)

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Профессор Молефи Кете Асанте — профессор и заведующий кафедрой африканских исследований в Университете Темпл (США). Исследования М. Асанте направлены на то, чтобы ориентировать африканское мышление и африканский народ на переосмысление исторического опыта Африки. Будучи наиболее публикуемым афроамериканским ученым и одним из самых цитируемых и влиятельных авторов в африканском мире, М. Асанте является ведущим современным теоретиком афроцентризма (афроцентричности). Его многочисленные работы (более 85 книг и сотни статей) свидетельствуют о его исключительном месте в сфере афроамериканских исследований. Основные работы: «Афроцентрический манифест» [Asante 2007a], «История Африки» [Asante 2007b], «Афроцентрическая идея» [Asante 1998], «Африканские пирамиды знаний» [Asante 2015], «Стирание расизма: выживание американской нации» [Asante 2009], «Как я бежал к Африке» [Asante 2011], «Лицом к югу от Африки» [Asante 2014] и «Революционная педагогика» [Asante 2017] стали богатыми источниками для многочисленных исследователей. М. Асанте был отмечен наградой «Выдающийся ученый» Национальной коммуникационной ассоциации (NCA), что делает его одним из лучших экспертов в области коммуникации.

В своем интервью М. Асанте выражает свою позицию основного сторонника афроцентричности и создания соответствующих институтов, исследовательских центров, департаментов, журналов, программ конференций и семинаров, а также расширения возможностей академического наставничества. М. Асанте подготовил более 100 исследований, ряд из которых являются одними из ключевых экспертов в области афрокологии. М. Асанте является профессором африканистики в Университете Темпл; преподавал в Университете Калифорнии, Университете штата Нью-Йорк, Университете Говарда, Университете Пердью, Университете штата Флорида, а также был приглашенным исследователем в Университете Южной Африки (ЮАР), Университете Чжэцзян в Ханчжоу (КНР), в Ибаданском университете (Нигерия).

Ключевые слова: афроцентризм, Африка, афроамериканцы, африканские исследования, афрокология, афрофутуризм, культурализм, постколониализм, деколониализм, интеллектуалы

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A.X. Smith: *Professor Asante, how did you find your path in re-theorizing the social situation and solution to the African condition? Why is the discipline of Africology the correct home for your work?*

M.K. Asante: The most radical decision I made was to begin where I was and to theorize from my most basic reality. I was an African,

descended from generations of enslaved Africans, born in the brutish American South, to a peasant family, outside of the mainstream of white America. Clarity was essential to my survival. If you are in the forest and you cannot get your bearings you are likely to remain lost, and this was something that I knew as a teenager that I had to escape.

A.X. Smith: *How does your work differ from others who consider themselves radical in the tradition of culturalists such as Bhabha, Maldonado-Torres, Boaventura de Sousa Santos [Boaventura 2014], and Stuart Hall?*

M.K. Asante: I think that I have more anger. By the way it is a healthy emotion and nature would not have given it to us unless it had some particular use. I am focused on a way that I have not seen in the works of Homi K. Bhabha, for instance [Bhabha 2004]. There is Bhabha's gift to the world of this notion of hybridity as a strategy which I reject. The only people who are credited with hybridity are those who are powerless; the powerful are always clear in saying that they are indestructible. Of course, this cannot be true, but it is their strategy and they are happy to leave the rest with third space which I see as a tragic thirdness when in fact there is neither, for me, first or second, only human being in all of our contradictions. Mimicry is not so much a strategy as a concealment of one's real emotions. I do not seek to imitate my oppressor, and I will not allow it to be foisted upon me, and neither would I foist it upon another.

There is a growing awareness, probably advanced by Bhabha [Bhabha 2004], Nelson Maldonado-Torres [2012], Walter D. Mignolo [2011], Ramon Grosfoguel [Castro-Gomez, Grosfoguel 2007], and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni [2013], that a discourse on postcoloniality and decoloniality are central to African revival. What is your take on this chorus of contemporary concerns with the colonial experience?

Well, I see the trap that they are in and I have a lot of respect for their intellectual virtuosity particularly as it relates to naming something.

A.X. Smith: *What do you mean?*

M.K. Asante: To say postcolonial or decolonial can be terribly misleading. We have not gone beyond the colonial state in actuality on the continent of Africa. We are either in the colonial situation or preparing to be in the colonial situation. To the degree that colonial refers to existing as the colony of a larger, more economically secure state, few African nations

have escaped this situation. However, I will say that there is something else that bothers me about this emphasis on coloniality, decoloniality, and postcoloniality; it is the assertion of the colonial as the central historical icon in African reality. I urge African intellectuals to de-escalate this rhetoric of the colonial.

A.X. Smith: *I take it that you are questioning the shape of the so-called postcolonial argument. Can you speak more to the cultural question in this regard?*

M.K. Asante: There is a painful reality in critical theory which has rarely been exposed. Eurocentric writers and some African intellectuals have been quick to avoid the cultural discourse as articulated by African American thinkers and activists. For example, Maulana Karenga, the founder of the Kwanzaa theory [Karenga 2008], and the creator of the world African holiday Kwanzaa [Karenga 1997], is a far more significant culturalist than any of the people usually discussed in critical theory, as far as I can see in relationship to African Renaissance. It was Karenga, long before Stuart Hall [1997] or others, who explained the relevance of culture to transformation. Karenga argued in the 1960s, more than twenty years before the cultural studies movement in England, that the key crisis in African history is cultural [Karenga 1972].

A.X. Smith: *What role does Afrocentricity play in African Renaissance?*

M.K. Asante: It is central to almost any technical, educational, economic, or cultural advance toward a genuine African Renaissance. Centuries of predatory brutishness have dislocated African people from histories, languages, and institutions.

A.X. Smith: *Can you give a succinct definition of Afrocentricity?*

M.K. Asante: Afrocentricity is a paradigm containing requirements for agency and subject placement for African people within the confines of African historical narratives; thus, moving Africans from the margins to the center in African discourse. Various Afrocentric theories

on culture, spirituality, language, history, and psycho-logy have become parts of a broad-based critical analysis. My students Victor Okafor [2017], Ana Monteiro-Ferreira [2015], Ibram Kendi [2019], and Michael Tillotson [2011] have written inte-resting books on this topic.

A.X. Smith: *What influences are strongest in your own work?*

M.K. Asante: As I view my work, I see it as joining the on-going conversation about African liberation, freedom, and transformation begun with Cheikh Anta Diop's "The African Origin of Civilization" [Diop 1989]. I was fortunate to be able to see how Diop's work was different from that of the legendary W.E.B. Du Bois who inspired me with his breadth of knowledge. Diop's work was monumental in its re-writing of African history; he was not merely a historian but someone who took imperial and colonial history to task for being stuck in a racist paradigm that denied ancient Egypt to Africa. That is why my book, "The History of Africa" [Asante 2007b], was written with a comprehensive continental focus. I do not believe in the false separation of the continent as Sub-Saharan and Northern. It is all Africa.

The Eurocentric writers who first made this division which was kept by Edward Said in his formulation of Orientalism [Said 1979] meant to deny the blackness of the Egyptians. Indeed, the National Geographic Society, with its promotion of Eurocentric dominance, has kept the images of ancient African per-aas (pharaohs) white in its documentaries. The power to produce images is also the power to distort reality, and African scholars have a special obligation to advance truth about its own history. Diop was the key influence on my historical outlook although I am influenced by Abdias do Nascimento, the Afro-Brazilian intellectual [Nascimento 1992]; Maulana Karenga, Ama Mazama, the Guadeloupean culturalist [Mazama 1997]; Nah Dove, the Diopian theorist [Dove 1998], and Asa Hilliard, the educational psychologist [Hilliard 1998]. My work with Yoshitaka Miike, Jing Ling, and Simphiwe Sesanti helped me to see the potentiality of the centered idea in connection

with overcoming the legacies of enslavement and colonialism [Asante 2013].

A.X. Smith: *What was it like to write and propose a PhD in African American Studies without a model before you? What suggested this possibility to you and what kind of character must you have had to see it through?*

M.K. Asante: African Americans are the prevailing force in the American society. You cannot know anything about America without understanding the origin, role, critical character, legal doctrines, immigration policies, and domestic violence related to Africans who laid the material foundation of the country. I wrote the proposal for the doctorate with all of that in mind, but also with the idea that a people whose achievements in science, arts and culture far outdistanced what one would have expected of such a small population. Our novelists, historians, critics, poets, and artists established a connection to African roots that elevated all discourse on race, class, and gender. Although Temple University in 1988 was the first to have a doctoral program in Africology¹, there are now nearly twenty such programs.

A.X. Smith: *Why have Afrocentrists claimed the African classical tradition as a starting point for much of the inquiry in the field?*

M.K. Asante: Because one needs chronology to make sense out of history. The pyramids were built nearly 2200 years before Homer, so why start human inquiry with the Greek poet when Imhotep, the builder of the first pyramid, is the foundational intellectual of world history?

A.X. Smith: *Your career spans several decades, and you have influenced many scholars, do you see yourself as a public intellectual?*

M.K. Asante: No, public intellectuals are made by the media; I am an activist intellectual. Some of my more than one hundred students are now considered or consider themselves public intellectuals; as for me I am committed to the

¹ Africology and African American Studies // Temple University. URL: <https://www.cla.temple.edu/africology-and-african-american-studies/> (accessed: 13.01.2020).

cultural advancement of African people who have been dislocated by brutish experiences of racial, social, and economic injustice. For this task, one must be dedicated to an activist mission to confront irrationality with reason and to engage in deep reflection on the meaning of the human.

A.X. Smith: *How do you see the notion of African dispossession in the context of academic studies?*

M.K. Asante: Quite frankly, Africa is being dispossessed at this moment, of everything, and in every region of the continent, but the most egregious dispossession is the taking away of Africa's sense of confidence. We have many Africans who have achieved world status as leaders, scholars, and intellectuals, yet as a continent and as a global people we are still being dispossessed of our power and our capability, and this leads to a sense of failure which in most cases is a faux failure.

A.X. Smith: *But you have spoken recently in Berlin on Afrofuturism, do you see this as an important movement in Afrocentricity?*

M.K. Asante: Yes, it is a point in time, a sticky point, one that will reverberate with the works being done by Reynaldo Anderson and yourself, if you permit me, in this area. I am a participant in this movement and truly wish to salute Natasha Kelly² and the team around her in Berlin for pushing the idea that we will not merely be in the future, but we will assist in making a large part of it.

A.X. Smith: *What are your current projects?*

M.K. Asante: Do you mean institutionalizing projects or simple writing projects?

A.X. Smith: *I mean any projects you want to share with the public.*

M.K. Asante: In effect, you are right to ask about current projects because they are a part of my entire work at the present time; they are

collective and always philosophical in some sense even if they are building institutions, centers, and making symposia. I am completing five manuscripts at the current time. I have publishing contracts for four of them and will seek a contract for the fifth very soon.

A.X. Smith: *What are these assignments that you have given yourself?*

M.K. Asante: I actually gave these assignments to myself several years ago. My book "Radical Insurgencies" will appear in the next few months [Asante 2020]. My book, "An Afrocentric Pan-Africanism", comes out in the summer 2020; and the book, "Ama Mazama: The Ogunic Presence in Africology", will appear in the Fall 2020. The fourth book, "Privileging Communication", co-written with Julie Morgan, a communication professor, will be published later in 2020. I have completed the fifth, "Characters and Characterizations: Afrocentric Essays", which I hope to publish also in 2020.

A.X. Smith: *As I was looking over your list of publications from your CV, I see that this will bring you to about 90 books in your career. What is your creative strategy?*

M.K. Asante: Well, I do not have a particular strategy except to write something in some genre every day. It is not systematic; I just have a lot to say.

A.X. Smith: *Given the fact that you have written so many books, some of them highly regarded, why aren't you a household name?*

M.K. Asante: I was at dinner with James Baldwin a few months before his death³ and he was ranting about the lack of recognition from the American literary establishment. He never received any prize from the American establishment for any of his works, though he was commercially successful. I, along with Houston Baker, the eminent African American critic, and Rowena Stewart, museum director

² Natasha A. Kelly. URL: <http://natashaakelly.com/> (accessed: 13.01.2020).

³ James Baldwin (1924—1987) was well-known American novelist and activist, who explored in his essays racial distinctions in Western societies (*Editor's Note*).

whose house we were in, tried to assuage him. “Jimmy, your works are in the hearts of the people”, I remember saying to him. He drank some more, then cursed the American literary elite again, and said that he had received the Croix de Guerre from the French, but nothing from the Americans. I tell you this story because in a world of literary justice I would be considered significant for my contributions, but it is rare for someone who speaks and writes about racism, injustice, and African empowerment to be rewarded in a racist society. It is dangerous and so I resign myself to the fate of Du Bois, Diop, Fanon, Biko, who never received any awards and little recognition for their brilliance until their deaths; they live in the hearts of the people whom they served. In some ways, this is as it should be. Perhaps my students will speak for me as I have spoken for Baldwin, Fanon, Biko, Diop, and Du Bois.

A.X. Smith: *What do you see as the future of Afrocentricity?*

M.K. Asante: Well, it is a useful paradigm for a people who have been dislocated. In some form or the other my students, even international students, have found this a very productive paradigm. My students from Bangladesh, China or Japan have begun to understand their own distance from their own cultural centers. Sino-centric or Nippo-centric can be seen as reflections of people to see themselves as centered in their own historical realities. The African masses, whether in the continent of Africa or in the Diaspora, have been marginalized by the Western narrative on almost all questions of values, science, beauty, spirituality, law, and philosophy; the price we pay for our dislocation is insanity, so the only path for us is the continuation of the struggle to discover mental and psychological centeredness as a remedy for the trauma we have experienced at the hands of the colonial and slave masters. *A luta continua!*

A.X. Smith: *I would like to know from you as a historian, philosopher, psychologist and as an experienced observer, about the relationship between African diasporas of different*

generations living in the USA, and how strong is their connection with Africa?

M.K. Asante: This is a complex matter. More than 250 African ethnic groups were kidnapped and enslaved in what became the USA from 1619. During 246 of those 400 years Africans were enslaved in the USA. In fact, we were enslaved longer than we have had freedom. Those early Africans in the USA were a First Wave of displaced Africans. With the independence of African states on the continent there was another diaspora. I call it the Second Wave. This Second Wave of Africans came from individual African nations, e.g., Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, Somali, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Cameroon, Angola, Senegal, and so forth. They have established in the USA their own diaspora communities.

The First Wave maintains a psychological relationship to the African continent; the Second Wave has a more physical relationship with the continent because they are constantly going and coming from Africa. Tensions have occasionally arisen over the definition of who is an African and who is not an African. The First Wave is generically African because it is difficult, except through DNA, to know from what ethnic or national group is the ancestor land. The Second Wave is quite aware, through language and customs, the identities of ancestors. Both waves have ties to Africa in the sense that there has always been a Pan African connection to Africa on the part of some in the First Wave, and the fact that the Second Wave has maintained direct physical contact with the continent. It would be incorrect to assume that the vast majority of Africans in the USA have a direct contact or interest in Africa; yet it is true that the most conscious, political, and Afrocentric cadres of Africans are Pan Africanists with a deeply held belief in a United Africa.

A.X. Smith: *How do you see the future development of Africa? By strengthening the role of the African Union or by strengthening regional groupings as, AMU, CEN-SAD, COMESA, EAC, ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and SADC?*

M.K. Asante: The African Union suffers from internal and structural weakness. It does not

pay for itself; this is the initial crime of weakness. On the other hand, the regional institutions seem to move from strength to strength, but this may be a mirage with the exception of a few of the regions. All regional institutions are not equal. There are a couple of developments on the ground that might push the future of Africa toward a United Africa. Of course, there are also anti-union ideas as well. First, I see the growth of international Pan African movements at the grassroots level as a defining characteristic of the youth's dissatisfaction with the pace of developments. Several organizations such as the Pan African Federalist Movement, the revived All African Peoples' Revolutionary Party, and the Afrocentricity International organization with numerous chapters throughout Africa and the world have appeared to soak up some of the energy of this grassroots movement. Various national formations on the continent have declared themselves committed to the One Africa dream of Kwame Nkrumah and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The second development on the ground is the incredibly fast population growth rate of the

continent. The average age of the African population is 19. This portends a large population growth in the coming years. It will create simultaneously producers and consumers, creators and users, and will force the nations to adopt different cost-saving methods that might impact on the economies of Africa. Let me say that there is nothing wrong with a two-prong approach to this issue which would include support for the AU as well as the well-run regional associations and groupings.

A.X. Smith: *Is there anything else that you would like to say?*

M.K. Asante: When my father died in 1993 my brother Esikente found in his house 10 diaries which I am trying to edit for publication. I did not know about these diaries at the time but have found them quite interesting because the last time I saw him he complained of not being able to hold the pen in his hands. It was then that I knew he would soon leave us. I hope to be as dedicated as he was in his mastery of the pen, although I now use a computer, and continue to write as I see the facts.

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