

The Pursuit of Africology: On the Creation and Sustaining of Black Studies

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Origins

Without a doubt the Black Studies revolution of the late 20th century has profoundly affected the curricula of most institutions of higher education in the United States. Taken together with the infusion of students of African origin and the presence of multinational Africans as faculty, the advancement in curriculum at American colleges and universities is a quantum leap from what it was at the end of the 19th century. No traditional discipline, such as anthropology, history, sociology, or literature, can be the same since the revolution that brought African American Studies into existence. "Black Studies" was a term that grew out of the political and academic climate of the 1960s. When students at San Francisco State campaigned in 1968 for courses that reflected the experiences of African people, they called for Black Studies because so much of the curriculum was "White Studies" parading as if it were universal. Merritt College students in Oakland, California, were at the same time demonstrating for more Black faculty and African American history courses. In 1969, Nathan Hare founded the first department of Black Studies at San Francisco State University, putting that campus in the history of American higher education as the leading institution for the study of African phenomena. The California spirit of revolution in the classrooms had taken root in the organic struggles for equality carried on by African American students in the Bay Area and the Los Angeles region of the state. Motivated by the political, social, and economic ideas of self-determination and self-definition, students and young people led by the U.S. movement and the Black Panther Party, whatever their own differences, were united around the establishment of Black Studies. Almost simultaneously the movement caught on nationally, and chapters of Black Student Unions were created to express the pent-up intellectual energy felt by African American students.

The immediate academic aim was to create the opportunity for "a Black perspective" in the American academy in social sciences, arts, and humanities. A number of names emerged to describe the course of study and group of subjects under the umbrella of Black Studies. Among the more popular names were "Afro American Studies" as in the UCLA Center for Afro American Studies; "Africana

Studies” as in the Cornell University Department of Africana Studies; “African American Studies” as in the Temple University Department of African American Studies; “Africa World Studies” as in the Miami University “Africa World Studies” program; “African Diaspora Studies” as in the Ph.D. program at UC Berkeley; and “Africology” as in the Department of Africology at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. A few departments, such as Ohio State University and California State University–Long Beach, retain the title Black Studies. Increasingly, and for critical reasons, the term *Africology* has gained recognition as a name and objective of our intellectual pursuit.

Setting the Agenda

During the early days of the campaign for Black Studies, the most critical need was for faculty guidance about the courses being proposed. Students often developed syllabi, courses of study, and bibliographies and presented these to the various deans as indicative of what could be the core of Black Studies. But the list of faculty members who could assist the students was limited. Eventually, this led to the issue of having Black faculty to teach the courses. Most major universities had a few token Blacks who had been on campus for several years, but many of them did not relate to the innovations sought by the students.

At UCLA, the Harambee Club took the leadership in 1966 to compile a list of possible courses that could be taught at the university level. Similarly, students across the nation met day after day, night after night, in the most intense drive for academic freedom at the curricular level in the history of American education. No movement for curricular reform had ever been so widespread and so thoroughly universal in its intellectual commitment as the Black Studies movement. Its energy came directly from its organic link with the people who were experiencing the persistent White racial domination in the classrooms. These were not theorists who had studied at some elite graduate school; most were undergraduate students or graduate students who were the first-generation college students in their families. They could not afford to “mess up,” and yet they knew that they would be “messed up” if they took into their psychological systems the White racism that was being taught to them as if it were universal knowledge. They reacted strongly as one national block with a political drive that was demanding, and they were ultimately heard. Their pursuit, and ours even now, was for a discipline that would begin its study with African people as subjects rather than objects (Asante, 1999).

However, in the process, many young people were lost in the tumult that accompanied the birth of the new field. When students completed their tomes of syllabi and bibliographies, they would often march to the offices of the university leaders with their work in one hand and a list of demands in the other. They wanted, among other things, additional Black faculty members, Black cultural centers, lecture programs of outstanding Black scholars, and sensitivity classes for White faculty members. The institutional leaders were quick to call the police to the campuses. Many African American students were arrested during that period, and some

were given unfairly long sentences. They remain the heroes of the struggle for equal education, and their legacies are in the thousands of students who have been taught in African American Studies, although those early pioneers seem forgotten.

A Search for Faculty

Another issue that faced the incipient movement was who would teach the courses and where would the university find professors. This proved to be a critical issue, one that has continued to shape, and in some senses, to distort the field. The terminal degree for most academic disciplines is the doctorate. Although there were hundreds of African Americans with this degree in the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of them taught at predominantly Black institutions in the South. The only other sources of African-descended doctorates were continental Africans who had been educated in the United States. African Americans entered the predominantly White institutions of higher education in large numbers in the late 1960s, but it would be several years before Black Studies departments would have the benefit of their education, and even then, there would be inherent theoretical and philosophical issues. Eager to attract and hire Black professors, many universities hired continental African professors. This proved to be a challenging action both for the professors and the students who had campaigned for their hiring. In the first place, as I indicated in my book *Afrocentricity* (Asante, 2001), the emphasis on the race of the professors to be hired led African American students to a dead-end when some Black professors, continental and diasporan, were less knowledgeable than some White professors. Insistence on biology always leads to a misunderstanding of the cultural, social, and psychological experiences necessary for empathetic relationships. One might say that biology, at some point, is important, but it is not defining in terms of who should teach African American Studies. The continental Africans who had doctoral degrees were usually trained by White professors who had very little appreciation of the history of African Americans. This meant that the continental Africans had to be quick studies in the African American experience in order to be successful as professors in Black Studies. They had to abandon the attitudes of some of their White professors and adopt a consciousness that was African American. The scores of Africans who did so were exceptionally brilliant in the classrooms. Some were heroic and memorable such as Boniface Obichere, a Nigerian by birth, who taught me African History at UCLA. Some made this change quite easily, and others found it rather difficult. The problem was often that these continental professors had not taken on the issues of the African Americans, and they fell victims to the same racism that the students had complained about prior to their hiring. Indeed, some continental African professors found the task daunting and opted to join more traditional departments.

In some cases the universities, desperate to find faculty, opted to employ African Americans who had no degree or who did not have the terminal degree, although they had other degrees. This meant that significant community activists could teach in their own fields of expertise and achievement. Among the prominent individuals

who came to lecture at universities under those circumstances were Sonia Sanchez, Bayard Rustin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Eldridge Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, Margaret Walker, Charles Fuller, and numerous others. Some major universities, to gain African American professors, even raided the faculties of predominantly Black institutions such as Howard, Fisk, Tuskegee, and Hampton. Arna Bontemps, nearly retired, left Fisk to join the faculty at Yale University, for instance.

The General Revolution

There have been three movements for academic enrichment within the general revolution initiated by the Black Studies revolution. Each movement was pegged to one of the terms for the concentration: Black Studies, Africana, and Africology. Furthermore, each of these movements had as its political objective the freeing of the minds of the students so that they might reflect on the vast and diverse universe of knowledge usually kept from them.

The Black Studies Movement

The Black Studies movement did not arise out of a primordial *nun* but rather from an organized group of ideas that formed a core philosophy for use in confronting the status quo in education. There was a powerfully raw energy to the creation of the Black Studies movement. It was unlike any other transformation in the Academy. Groups of students from various colleges, acting simultaneously, almost as if they were collectively programmed, passed through the same processes to establish Black Studies on their campuses. First, it was necessary to define the missing links in the institutional chain of delivering information; subsequently, the students would have to insist that those links could be supplied with information and scholarship; and finally the students would have to oversee the initiation of the program to assist the institution. All over the United States from Boston to San Francisco, from Detroit to Miami, African American students projected their vision. It was often resisted, students were arrested, and many were attacked by police. In the end, when the dust had settled, African American students had opened most of the doors at major American universities.

What constituted the Black Studies movement? Like the Black Power Movement and the Black Is Beautiful Campaign, the Black Studies movement was a move for self-definition, self-determination, and mental liberation. In this regard, it was in line with the most radical elements of the contemporary objective of securing for African Americans a more positive place in the curriculum. By its projection as *Black*, the movement suggested its ethnic and cultural energy, and its use of the word *Studies* indicated its intellectual component. This was new and different because never before had Black and Studies been used in the same term. Most White Americans could not conceive of anything Black being connected to anything intellectual. In answering the most ignorant questions from the White community about

the nature of the intellectual study of African people, Black Studies “closed the mouths” of the naysayers.

The defining moment in the Black Studies movement was the publication of Maulana Karenga’s *Introduction to Black Studies* (1982). When this book was published, the field had its first attempt to draw the boundaries of a new area of study. What Karenga did in *Introduction* was to state precisely how the field should be conceptualized, discussed, and projected. One could no longer assume that the field of study did not have precursor ideas, a core of intellectuals, and approaches to phenomena that constituted a whole new area of inquiry. This book was first published in 1979 and immediately created a stir in the field because until its appearance no one had conceived of Black Studies in such a holistic fashion. Karenga organized the field into seven key areas: history, mythology, motif, ethos, social organization, political organization, and economic organization. These divisions were possible within the context of the Kwaia philosophy that had been the foundation for the creation of numerous self-defining experiences in the African American community.

Africana Studies Movement

Riding on the tide created by Black Studies, the Africana Studies movement was carried to new shores in the academy in the early 1980s. However, this movement was not of a different species than Black Studies; it was in fact a new name for Black Studies. The National Council for Black Studies was the first professional organization in the field, and it had increasingly referred to the field by the name “Africana” so that by the mid-1980s, there were a good number of departments with that name. The aim was to make the field more academic and less political by changing the name of the departments around the nation. The Africana Studies movement was initiated by members of the Cornell University faculty who were among the first to adopt the name Africana Studies for their department. The term was quickly adopted by other departments in the Northeast part of the United States and soon spread to the Midwest because of the popularity of the professors from Cornell. Seeking to offset any criticism, the faculty who subscribed to the utility of the name Africana presented two arguments for its acceptance. First, Africana was meant to embrace the African world. Secondly, it was intended to depoliticize the study of African phenomena. As such, Africana was meant to be a step away from confrontation—that is, Black versus White. To say “Africana” was more than saying “African American”; it was a statement about the nature of the African experience in the world. This meant that the scholar could embrace the Caribbean, South America, and the African continent as a part of the field of study. Indeed, Black Studies that had been limited to the African American experience was now enlarged to include African issues on the continent, political upheavals in South America, literary developments in Haiti, and numerous other issues. One could just as easily research and discuss the Esie stones of Nigeria as one could the meaning of economic liberation among African Americans in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

The Africological Movement

The Africological movement, emerging in the mid-1980s, was transgenerational and transcontinental in scope. In my book, *Afrocentricity* written initially in 1980 and revised several times since, I had spoken of a discipline of “Afrology.” This term was refined to “Africology” by the University of Wisconsin professor, Winston Van Horne. I have since employed this term, using the definition I once gave Afrology—that is, “the Afrocentric study of African phenomena.”

Temple University’s doctoral program, established in 1987, quickly adopted the new movement as a way to advance a disciplinary approach to the area of study. Africology as the Afrocentric study of African phenomena was more than an aggregation of courses about African people. One could find at a number of institutions a list of courses on African subjects, but it was only when there was a discipline, as defined by philosophy, methods, and orientation to data, that one could speak of a discipline. Africology was being used to signal that there was no longer a field, but a discipline of study. It had become fashionable to speak of Black Studies or Africana Studies as a field of study with numerous disciplines contributing to the study of African people. This was based on the old ethnic studies or area study model. For the Africologist this was a dead-end model that would not lead to the growth of the study of African phenomena or to the advancement of scientific methods. The reason this was so had to do with the fact that science could expand only if researchers were able to think outside of the traditions. This was not about to happen with Black Studies scholars who had not committed discipline suicide—that is, who had not abandoned their traditional or doctoral areas of study. Thus, to think outside of the box, so to speak, one had to believe that there was enough in the study of African phenomena, meaning in the United States and everywhere else where African people exist, to warrant strong methodological and philosophical study.

Africologists repeat the dictum that a department is not a discipline and a discipline does not constitute a department. A department is an administrative, not an intellectual, project. Although it takes intelligence to organize a department so that the administrative functions of the faculty members can be carried out, the real intellectual discourse is around philosophical orientations and theoretical emphases that create a discipline. It is clearer today than ever before among scholars who articulate the Africological movement position that there are numerous interests, such as social work, social institutions, literary studies, historical experiences, psychological questions, and linguistic issues, but only one discipline. Those who accept this view are growing in numbers as well as in influence. Fundamental to this project is the belief that Cheikh Anta Diop (1976) was correct to argue that until Africans dare to connect Ancient Egypt to the rest of Africa there could be no true interpretation of African history. Diop understood the significance of examining the classical civilizations of Africa as a prelude to any discourse on anything African. Separating the study of African culture or civilizations by the Atlantic Ocean is a peculiar saline demarcation that does not exist in any real sense. Thus, to speak of a Black Atlantic makes no real intellectual sense when you assume that Brazil, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Jamaica, and Panama do not have anything to do with

Africans in England or the United States. Indeed, all Africans on both sides of the Atlantic are inextricably joined by a common experience and a common cultural response, however tailored the response is to specific histories. Diop was the first African to articulate so powerfully the necessity for our linkage. Such clarity, on the part of the late Senegalese scholar, made him, alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, the greatest intellectual of the 20th century. When Diop died in 1986, he had already become the single most important historian of ancient Africa and consequently the patron of a new historiography that would elevate the writing of African history to another level of Afrocentricity (Keita, 2001).

The Issues of Theory and Method

The challenge to Africologists in the postmodern era is to devise ways to explore African phenomena that avoid the worst pitfalls of Western theories and methods. This means that the source of the theories must be in the historical and lived experiences of the African people wherever they appear in the world. Congruent theories of African phenomena have symmetry to African life. This does not mean that we cannot learn from theories developed in other places but, rather, that symmetry to one's own phenomenological history is a better way to view reality. I think that the issues of method are similar. You cannot stick your head in the sand and assume that the methods often used by non-Afrocentrists in an effort to predict and control our behavior can be readily applied to our phenomena without modification.

To examine theory and method is to confront the problem of Western science's attempt to bifurcate the study of human experiences. In most departments of Africology, we are faced with deciding whether we are in the social sciences or the humanities. Here, we are at Eshu's crossroads, presented with a choice. If we claim to be social scientists, studying the nature of human behavior, we wonder about our interests in the creations of human beings, in art, literature, and music. If we claim to be in the humanities, then we are left asking questions about our interests in how African people survive under the pressures of racist brutality and discrimination. So we are caught between the Limpopo and the Zambezi; if we cross the first, we are leaving behind the Great Zimbabwe, and if we cross the second, we also leave behind the Great Zimbabwe. The resolution of this issue can only come from our own cultural center. As we stand on the pinnacle of the Great Zimbabwe, we must see our world going out to the various ends but not being defined by one or the other.

All departments of Africology should have the ability to articulate both interests as a part of the philosophical project. In the first place, the study of African phenomena for us does not subscribe to the Western division where you separate behavioral type studies from creative type studies. Our concentrations in cultural aesthetics or in social behavior is intended to suggest that what passes for social sciences includes far more than psychology or sociology and what passes for arts and humanities includes far more than writing and dancing. All human behavior is a creative product, and all human creations are evidence of human behavior. Therefore, we cannot and should not be boxed into choosing one side or the other;

we do both, and our discipline is one whether or not for administrative purposes a university wants to keep us in social sciences or humanities.

Afrocentric metatheory is the leading approach to the examination of African phenomena. This metatheory exists as a place in which Afrocentric theories can be generated to deal with practically any issue in the African world. A study by Ama Mazama (1997) of the way Africans have created language in the Americas is an example of how a scholar can creatively position the Afrocentric theory. Mazama is convinced that the language of the Africans of Guadeloupe is an African language, not some bad French. She writes of a first measure for understanding the relationship of the Africans in Guadeloupe to Africa this way:

La première consiste à réfuter le mythe du vacuum linguistique et culturel dans lequel nos ancêtres se seraient trouvés en arrivant dans les Caraïbes afin de démontrer, au contraire, la continuité historico-culturelle qui existe entre l'Afrique et les Caraïbes, ainsi que je m'y suis attachée dans ce livre. La deuxième mesure à prendre est l'identification de la composante africaine des langues caribéennes. (p. 124)

(Essentially, Mazama is concerned with two measures: (a) the refutation of the idea that there was a cultural and linguistic vacuum that disconnected Africans from Africa when they were brought to the Caribbean and (b) the identification of the Caribbean languages as African languages. She argues for the continuity of African culture from Africa to the Caribbean.) An Afrocentric theory is one constructed to give Africans a centered role in their own phenomena. It is an attack on marginality and peripheralization of Africans. There can be as many Afrocentric theories as scholars seek to create, all operating within the same general Afrocentric framework. Although Africologists can explore the relationship of other theories to the phenomena of Africans, the sine qua non of the Africological adventure is Afrocentricity.

Living With Athens and Rome

Our confrontation with the social sciences and humanities occurs because the American academy was essentially defined with a Greek or Roman head at the beginning of all academic knowledge. Because African American studies departments exist within American academies, they are victims of the categories of Western society. Each of the Western liberal arts, making up the core of the humanities, is accredited to either a Greek or Roman founder. For example,

<i>Liberal Arts</i>	<i>Patron</i>
Arithmetic	Pythagoras
Geometry	Euclid
Music	Tubalcain
Astronomy	Ptolemy
Logic	Aristotle
Rhetoric	Cicero

Unfortunately, Africologists have often bought into this system of thinking, which prevents them from examining the records that exist before the Greeks and the Romans. The earliest philosophers in the world are African philosophers. The names and works of Imhotep, Ptahhotep, Kagemni, Amenemhat, Amenomope, Akhenaten, Merikare, and Duauf must be studied in our departments in order to gain a clear conception of the origin of even the Western ideas of liberal arts (Asante, 2000). Furthermore, the Greeks themselves claimed that the Africans were the first to “invent” the sciences. Such information escapes those who have declared a vulgar allegiance to poor scholarship and bad science. Ours must be a commitment to new forms of knowledge based in the best traditions and centeredness of African culture.

A similar situation exists in regard to the social sciences, technically a newer area of human study than the liberal arts. When one looks, for example, at the origin of sociology, one will normally be driven to European scholars, Weber being the most prominent in contemporary times, although it has not always been so. But the Africologist must raise the question of Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro* as the first real urban sociology in the world (Du Bois, 1996). This is not so much a methodological issue as it is a historical fact, but nevertheless it reorients our thinking about sociology. We can do this with our study of psychology and biology as well. When Western scholars conceived of some of these social and behavioral sciences—for example, anthropology, and biology, they were trying to define ways to suggest the superiority of White people.

The discipline of Africology, that is, *the Afrocentric study of African phenomena* is grounded in the principles of *Ma’at*. Those ancient African principles seem to hold for all African societies and for most African people transgenerationally and transnationally. The principles of *Ma’at*, as recently clarified by Maulana Karenga (2004), include harmony, balance, order, justice, righteousness, truth, and reciprocity. What the Africologist seeks in his or her research is the pathway to harmony and order in society. This is why the ancient people of Kemet called this concept *Ma’at*. This is not about observing and experimenting in order to control your behavior but, rather, this is about making humans whole.

When I created the first Ph.D. program in African American Studies in 1987 at Temple University, I had to keep uppermost in my mind the fact that African intellectual traditions were not antipeople. In fact, the doctoral program in African American Studies had to be a people-affirming program. Writing and defending a program that was considered to be far from the usual university development fare had its disappointments and rewards. I understood precisely what we were up against when the proposal went to the Graduate Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences. Not only were there people with Neanderthalian ideas but also some who did not want to see any challenge to the hegemony of European education even if it meant that they would be less educated if they did not know the information. They were in bliss in their ignorance. They would soon be confronted with a proposal that met the university’s requirements in every way. Furthermore, I was a professor who was more published than any of my White colleagues and had created two previous graduate programs—the M.A. in Afro American Studies at UCLA and the M.A. in Communication at State University of New York at Buffalo.

I soon had a parade of White professors tell me why they could not approve the M.A. and Ph.D. in African American Studies at Temple. The argument, whether from history, English, or sociology, was the same argument: There was no guarantee that the program was going to be a quality program. What this meant to me was that they were concerned that the principal faculty handling the courses and the program would be African American. Of course, their objections had nothing to do with quality because our faculty was more “qualified” than some of those raising the objections. Emma Lapsansky from the Dean of Arts and Sciences office went so far as to write a two-page letter decrying the establishment of an “intellectual ghetto” on campus. My response to her was pointed: The entire university was already one big intellectual ghetto, and I was only trying to open it up. When the first 35 graduate students entered the university in the fall of 1988, they changed forever the nature of education at predominantly White institutions in America. But they changed something else as well—the intellectual basis for African American Studies. The only way that I could justify the creation of a doctoral program was that we were teaching something that was not being taught anywhere else. This meant that those of us who worked in the department had to commit discipline suicide from our old doctorates and work feverishly to flesh out this new discipline that was not African American history, not African American literature, not Women’s Studies, not African American sociology, and not Studies in Racism.

We confronted the turf wars with other departments and won on the merits of what it was that we were doing. We found the energy and the time to write the texts and establish the sequences that would demonstrate that we were as much a discipline as any other group of scholars. The process is not over; it has really only just begun. African history is not complete. In Africology, it ought to be possible to point to texts written by scholars in our field, not in literature, English, sociology, and history, as significant for our graduate students. We are doing more in this regard with the annual Cheikh Anta Diop Conference, the student conferences, the Nommo symposia, and the publication of fundamental works such as *The African Intellectual Heritage* (Asante & Abarry, 1996) and the editing of numerous journals. Finally, the pursuit of Africology is nearly completed but will not be truly accomplished until contemporary Black Studies departments begin to refurbish their faculties with Ph.D.s who have completed the terminal degree in the field. There are many scholars teaching in Black Studies who self-declare as something other than Black Studies professors. I find this quite abominable when it comes to the process of developing a discipline. However, in many ways, those of us of the first generation and the second generation have been responsible for this circumstance by hiring individuals who are looking for a job rather than those who know the discipline and will continue the legacy established by the early scholars in the field. I was struck not long ago by how inadequate our education in the field and its history has been when I found out that there were professors teaching in Black Studies at a certain institution who had never heard of Nathan Hare. When we have reached the level of having more than half of our faculty members with degrees in African American or Africana Studies, we can say that the discipline is on the road to security and maturity.

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