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Elucidating Afrocentricity as a contemporary theoretical stance through ‘epistemic disobedience’

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Abstract. The use of Afrocentricity as a contemporary theoretical lens has triggered remarkable debate among African scholars. There is growing contestation among African intellectuals on the future of knowledge construction in the wake of the collapse of colonization in Africa. The contestation on the applicability of the Afrocentricity as a theory is largely triggered by the assumed superiority of Western thought. One of the major proponents of Afrocentricity Melefe Kete Asante has prompted an interesting question ‘Why have Africans been shut out of global development?’ The question attracts the need for African scholarship to take into consideration a context based theoretical standpoint and methodology. Nevertheless, the quest for a purely African based thought is clashed by postmodernists who contend that there is no such thing as “Africans” because there are many different types of Africans and all Africans are not equal. It is from this standpoint that this paper seeks to position Afrocentricity as a fundamental theoretical perspective in African scholarship. Afrocentricity is considered to be a catalyst of change whose goal is to restore the African understanding of the world. As such, through what some scholars have termed “epistemic disobedience” which is a form of epistemic revolt in favour of decolonisation of thought, this paper provides a critical analysis of the relevance of Afrocentricity as a theoretical standpoint.

Keywords. Afrocentricity, African agency, Epistemology, Molefe Asante, Ontology

1. Introduction and background

Afrocentricity as a theoretical perspective developed in the African American cultural landscape as a set of principles that account for the understanding of an African sense of wholeness in addressing the life and experience of people of African descent around the world. The theory emerged from the Afrocentric worldview which deals with the aspects of African identity from the perspective of African people. This concept has been termed “Afrocentricity” by Molefe Asante in an effort to convey the profound need for African people to be re-located historically, economically, socially, spiritually, politically, emotionally and philosophically (Mazama, 2001).

The point of departure within the Afrocentricity paradigm debate is that since the advent of colonialism and slave trade, information pertaining Africans and their history has been presented from a European point of view. The argument provoked in this paper is that Africans can be studied outside the context of Europeans and Eurocentric analytical framework. Moreover, Knowledge of the African people can also be produced in the context of the African people. Knowledge produced outside the context of Afrocentricity is usually distorted in the

sense that it glorifies the slavers and colonisers whilst at the same time distorting and neglecting African contributions to world development and their opinions. Williams (1991) argues that the liberation of Africa from European colonialism came with calls for the liberation of knowledge by some Africans who proposed that knowledge should be looked at from the point of view of Africans. This approach is important as it provokes an inquiry into African ontology and epistemology.

The Afrocentric paradigm deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people. The argument is that African thought should be centred, located, oriented and grounded within the African way of life. Asante argues that Africans have been decentred and dislocated across all social spheres such that in most instances they are reduced to objects. Mkabela (2005) opined that Africans are decentred implying that they have lost their cultural footing and have become disoriented. In essence, Afrocentricity emerges as a methodology that consciously operates within African ways of knowing and existence and results in the implementation of principles, methods, concepts and ideas that are derived from our own African cultural experiences (Mazama, 2003).

Some years back when I was studying towards my Masters degree in Sociology at a South African public university, I adopted Afrocentricity in a study that sought to understand climate change and the use of indigenous knowledge in a rural community in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, one of my promoters for the Masters dissertation was an ardent critique of the theory. His major argument was that Afrocentricity was simply a 'movement' not a theory hence it was inappropriate to employ it as a theoretical lens for the research. However, as a keen proponent of the theory and its appropriateness for my research, I employed it and external examiners were impressed and awarded the Masters dissertation cum-laude. The contest by my former promoter was a result of misinformation that is widespread among a number of scholars. The problem encountered with African scholars who critique the use of Afrocentricity is lack of identity scholarship which informs the need for decoloniality of scholarship. This is because construction of identity is of paramount importance in scholarship such that the applicability of Afrocentricity in a study that is based on African indigenous experiences, for instance, is increasingly sufficing. From that standpoint, the theory is used across the board in the social sciences and beyond i.e. in Political science, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology to mention a few.

In a study to assess the role of IKS in climate governance, Mugambiwa (2020) merged Afrocentricity with Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) and Grounded Theory (GT) in order to develop an Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory (IKS) climate governance based conceptual framework. The adoption of GT by Mugambiwa (2020) provides a clear understanding of the role of Afrocentricity as a theory in social research. To put this into perspective, Glaser (1992) opines that grounded theory is employed as a general methodology of analysis closely associated with data collection. The theory makes use of data to formulate a theory using systematically applied set of methods. Importantly, Glaser and Strauss (1967) further suggests that grounded theory helps to forestall the opportunistic use of theories that hold a dubious fit. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized what they term logico-deductive theorising whereby a researcher makes use of selective examples systematically and allows them to have theoretical control over his/her formulations. This is because the adequacy of a theory in social research comes from the premise that it cannot be divorced from the process through which it is generated (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). Therefore, one of the ways of determining the applicability of a theory is by assessing the manner in which it was generated. This informs the applicability of Afrocentricity in that it is context specific and social bound which makes it appropriate for research that is rooted in African reality. This has also been

largely upheld in the decoloniality scholarship which emphasise the need for African scholarship to adopt Afro based methods and frameworks.

2. Epistemic disobedience

Mignolo (2013) traces the revolutionary quest for decoloniality from the Bandung Conference of 1955 where 29 Asia and Africa countries gathered to find a common ground with regards to a future that was neither capitalist nor communist. In essence, the major agenda for the gathering was decoloniality. Mignolo (2013) contends that the process of delinking Western thought in African scholarship paves way for thinking that subjugates chronologies of new epistemes or new paradigms such as modern, postmodern, altermodern, and the theory of relativity to mention a few. The author further suggest that epistemes are not alien to decolonial thinking. Mignolo (2007) asserts that *epistemic disobedience* is of paramount importance in the creation of African thought. The argument was that there is need for African scholars to embark on a revolutionary move of *epistemic de-linking* in order to get rid of Eurocentered thoughts, ingrained in Greek and Latin categories of thought. Based on the contribution of Mignolo to the epistemic disobedience, my submission is that Afrocentricity stands as a revolutionary means by African scholars to delink Eurocentric thought. In this paper, I argue that epistemic disobedience through Afrocentricity is achieved by observing the following fundamental facets; the Afrocentric philosophy, theoretical and methodological foundations of Afrocentricity, African epistemology and ontology, characteristics of the Afrocentric method and decoloniality of the social science.

2.1 The Afrocentric Philosophy

Having explored the general consensus on what Afrocentricity entails, it is imperative to observe the philosophical foundations of the theory. Asante's contribution to Afrocentricity from a philosophical point of view suggests that Afrocentricity is a way of answering all cultural, economic, political and social questions related to African people (Asante, 1992). The argument in that trajectory is that Afrocentricity cannot be reconciled to any hegemonic philosophy. Asante (2009) raised the major challenges that academics encounter in employing Afrocentricity as a philosophical paradigm. To address these challenges Asante proposed that the major question that one should answer is 'Why have Africans been shut out of global development?' Answering the question will provide a clue as to how issues pertaining Africans should be studied. In answering the question, Asante suggests, a postmodernist would begin by saying that there is no such thing as "Africans" because there are many different types of Africans and all Africans are not equal. The argument in that regard is that Africans should not be treated the same because they come from different contexts and their experiences differ as well. However, as a part of the development of Afrocentricity on the philosophical basis Asante (1990) argues that an Afrocentrist does not question the fact that there is a collective sense of Africanity. Rather, an Afrocentrist would look at the questions of location, control of the hegemonic global economy, marginalization, and power positions as keys to understand the lives of African people. In essence, this implies that despite the different groups of Africans that exist, they are differentiated based on their location, culture, history and experiences.

2.2 Theoretical and methodological foundations of Afrocentricity

Asante (2009) argues that the use of Afrocentricity as an intellectual attitude used in analysing data is not new since it is considered to date back to to the 1960s (Asante, 2009). However, Turner (in Pellebon, 2007) argues that Asante is the founder of Afrocentricity, as we know it today. Similarly, this is also supported by Mkabela (2005) whose argument is that, even

though as an intellectual idea, Afrocentricity was used in the 60s and 70s, Asante is the one who initiated a revolutionary scholarly movement that witnessed the use of Afrocentricity as a philosophy and conceptual framework. The paradigm was born out of a need to preserve and empower the African ways of knowing or ways of analysing data (Asante, 1990). This was achieved in a way that seems to reject the universalist notion of Eurocentrism, more especially positivism ‘which is a philosophical paradigm that originated in the 19th century and dominated the early 20th century (Kaboub, 2008).

Asante maintained that there was an urgent need to free Africans epistemologies from the constraints of Eurocentrism in connection with critical theory (Mkabela, 2005). In essence, when traced back historically, the aim of Afrocentric scholarship has always been and still is to shift, construct, critique, and challenge knowledge from an epistemology engendered within a Eurocentric cultural construct to an African cultural construct. From an academic perspective, Afrocentricity is defined in terms of the methodology, theory and ideology that should be employed to achieve its objectives towards attaining the proposed change. Afrocentricity is aimed at answering to the intellectual colonialism that serves to validate social, political and economic colonialism. Theoretically, Afrocentricity places African people at the centre of any analysis of African phenomena with regards to action and behaviour. Moreover, Asante (2009) suggests that Afrocentricity is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is ethically significant. In terms of behaviour, it was argued that Afrocentricity seeks to cherish the idea that “Africanness” itself is an ensemble of ethics. Afrocentricity represents the continued longing among Africans for some set of ideas that would bind them together as a community. This was considered to be important since it serves as an alternative to Eurocentric ideas that are widely considered to be superior (Chawane, 2016). Mugambiwa (2020) employed Afrocentricity as both a theoretical framework. In an inquiry on climate governance through indigenous knowledge systems, Mugambiwa adopted Afrocentricity and formulated a conceptual model for climate governance through Indigenous Knowledge systems. The author emphasise that Afrocentricity advocates for the fundamental role of the African people within the context of African history in a way that eliminates Europe from the heart of the African ontology.

2.3 African Epistemology and Ontology

The concept of African epistemology and ontology cherishes that culture plays an important role in cognitive knowledge of reality (Mugambiwa, 2020). Brown (2004) suggests that one needs to be familiar with the ontological commitments of a culture in order to appreciate and understand the role and nature of such ontological commitments. The knowledge of the African culture its conceptions of reality is through leads to a rich knowledge of the African approach to knowledge. Mugambiwa (2020) further argues that the centrality of traditional African thought is born out of the premise that within thin the African set up there are ancestral spirits whose intentions are known and significant to African people. Despite the fact that those ancestral spirits belong to the dead it is within the African reality that they play a fundamental role in the day to day lives of African people in their communities. Anselm & John (2015). This implies that for African people, reality is immensely consequential compared to what is recorded within the realm of empirical inquiry.

Moreover, Akanmidu (2005) is of the view that the proponents of African epistemology always direct attention to the cultural components of knowledge. However, this significantly opposes the ideological framework of European colonisation that hails the supremacy of Western reason over non-Western people and cultures. Akanmidu (2005) suggests that Africans

have their peculiar way of interpreting the world which constitutes African epistemology. Asante (1999) acknowledges that it is difficult to establish that Africans possess different cognition about the world from their Western counterpart. This is because despite the uniformity of human nature, cultural and environmental dictates impose themselves on people's understanding of reality (Asante, 1993). African epistemology entails what the African means and understands in the process of making a knowledge claim.

Asante's concept of 'location' is considered to be a key methodological perspective for Afrocentricity. Moreover, Asante argues that "language, myth, ancestral memory, dance-music-art, and science provide the sources of knowledge, the canons of proof, and the structure of truth" (1993, 108). In that regard, it is widely argued that abandoning empiricism, one abandons the search for canons and structures, believing instead that metaphors, processes, and patterns are more useful to understanding subjective reality. Afrocentricity is generally based on the notion that African people's main problem is usually their unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant conceptual frameworks (Mazama, 2001). The latent outcome of this attitude is that Africans are de-centred, which suggests that they have lost their cultural footing or identity and have become dis-located and dis-oriented (Asante, 1999). In response to this, Asante and other Afrocentric scholars systematically advanced the Afrocentric paradigm in order to explain the African way of life. Afrocentricity can be easily understood as using the African worldview to understand all manner of phenomena. It deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people (Mkabela, 2005). In essence, Afrocentricity places African ideals, values and philosophies at the centre of an analysis that involves African culture and behaviour.

The theory of Afrocentricity possesses a Pan-African scope and runs as a visible thread across various fields of study, which include African studies, sociology, anthropology, political sciences, and psychological (Mazama, 2005). This suggests that Afrocentricity fosters scholarly collective agency and open-discourse in favour of multiculturalism. That, in essence, is imperative for the preservation of African culture and society (Asante, 2009). However, other scholars such as D'Souza and Lefkowitz have labelled the Afrocentricity as a pseudoscience and an ideology that lacks rigour to be accepted as an empirically based theory of practice (Appiah, 1993). The Afrocentricity theory is considered to be a catalyst of change whose goal is to restore the African understanding of the world. This is achieved by placing African people at the centre of analysis of African experiences.

2.4 Characteristics of the Afrocentric Method

The general assumption of the Afrocentricity paradigm is that African people should reassert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity. The Afrocentric paradigm is a revolutionary shift in thinking proposed as a constructural adjustment to black disorientation and lack of agency (Asante, 2009). The question which stands as a point of departure among Afrocentric scholars is, "What would African people do if there were no white people?" The question is meant to suggest that what natural responses would occur in the relationships, attitudes toward the environment, kinship patterns, type of religion, and historical referent points for African people if there had not been any intervention of colonialism or enslavement. As such, Asante (2009) argues that Afrocentricity answers this question by asserting the central role of the African subject within the context of African history. That in essence removes Europe from the center of the African reality. As such, Afrocentricity becomes a revolutionary idea because it studies ideas, events, personalities and political processes from a standpoint of black people as subjects and not as objects. Four distinct characteristics emerged from the aforementioned conclusions on the role of the African in his metaphysics. The distinct

characteristics of Afrocentricity are locating the phenomena, position of the investigator, cultural criticism and analytic Afrocentricity.

Afrocentricity considers that no phenomena can be apprehended adequately without locating it first. The argument is that a phenomenon should be studied in relationship to psychological time and space and it must always be located. As such, this is considered to be the only way to investigate the complex interrelationships of science and art; design and execution; creation and maintenance; generation and tradition, and other areas bypassed by theory. In that regard, the interpretation of the dreams from an African perspective should not be in total isolation from the Western way.

2.4.1 Position of the investigator

The Afrocentric method considers phenomena to be diverse, dynamic and in motion. As such, it is necessary for a person to accurately note and record the location of phenomena even in the midst of fluctuations. This means that the investigator must know where he or she is standing in the process. Location of the phenomenon is an important theoretical process that informs the manner in which the researcher interprets the phenomenon.

2.4.2 Cultural criticism

Afrocentricity is a form of cultural criticism that examines etymological uses of words and terms in order to know the source of an author's location. This allows the intersection of ideas with actions and actions with ideas on the basis of what is negative and what is creative at the social, political or economic levels. The words and concepts that dominate the current study and qualifies it for an Afrocentricity inquiry include Ancestors, witchcraft, bones, culture and spirits.

2.4.3 Analytic Afrocentricity

Analytic Afrocentricity is the application of the principles of the Afrocentric method to textual analysis. The general consensus among Afrocentricity scholars is to understand the principles of the Afrocentric method in order to use them as a guide in analysis and discourse. Afrocentricity scholars cannot function properly as scientists if they do not adequately locate the phenomenon in time and space. This suggests that chronology is as important in some situations as location. The two aspects of analysis are central to any proper understanding of society, history and personality. As such, the task of Afrocentricity is to determine the extent to which the myths of society are represented as being central or marginal to society. This suggests that any textual analysis involves the concrete realities of lived experiences, thus making historical experiences a key element in analytic in Afrocentricity. The examination of attitude, direction and language in Afrocentricity seeks to uncover the imagination of the author. This suggests that what one seeks to do is to create an opportunity for the writer to reveal where he or she stands in relationship to the subject.

2.4.4 Decolonising the social science

A plethora of scholars such as Merryfield & Tlou, (2010); Asante, (1999); Gordon, (2003) have considered it ideal to Africanize the social science which they have argued would place the African in his/her rightful place. Borrowing from that standpoint, this paper argues that Africanizing the social science is essential because the social science is diverse and African perspectives need to be equally accommodated. As such, the paper provide ways in which the social sciences could be accordingly Africanized. The proposed ways are as follows; adoption

of Afrocentric paradigm vis-à-vis shifting from Western to Afrocentric ontology and epistemology and demystifying the misplaced context.

2.4.4.1 The use of Afrocentric Paradigms

The origin of the social science can be traced to around the 1760s when efforts were made to study man and society in Europe (Khanna & Vashisht, 1985). Further, Khanna & Vashisht (1985) go on to reveal that events that transpired in the 18th century that are namely; increased industrialization, the rise of capitalism, urbanization and population growth influenced the works of scholars like Karl Marx whose writings condemned capitalism and Auguste Comte who invented the term sociology which is considered to be the mother of all social sciences. From this point, a plethora of scholars rose to prominence and their writings were influenced by the works of the aforementioned classical theorists and accordingly the paradigms adopted were Eurocentric. This brings in the idea that the social science as it is known in the African context borrows a lot from the European context. As such, the adoption of Afrocentric theoretical paradigms born out of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is one of the most fundamental ways of decolonising the social science. Many writings in the social science today among scholars and post graduate students employ Western theories as paradigms or theoretical underpinnings and lens through which they describe events taking place in the African context.

2.4.4.2 Demystifying the misplaced context

In this paper I suggest the process of demystifying the misplaced context as one of the fundamental ways required to decolonise the social sciences. The argument is that there is a strong presence of the European theoretical and methodological orientation in the African social science scholarly work. The argument posed earlier in this paper suggested that the social science was invented in Europe as a response by the scholarly community to explain the events that were taking place in the 18th century. As such, the theories that were developed were also context specific in response to the stipulated events. Hence, the continued use of the same theoretical paradigms on the African context is what this essay terms the misplaced context. As such, one of the best ways in which the social sciences could be Africanized will be through the demystifying of this misplaced context. This can only be done by adoption of African theoretical paradigms that are context specific and social bound. This is important because the social science will be able to fully understand the African in his or her own context.

3. Concluding remarks

Afrocentricity as a source of epistemic disobedience provides a revolutionary channel to delink Western thought in African scholarship. The theory provides an African sense of wholeness in addressing the life and experience of people of African descent around the world. The theory constitutes adequate philosophical foundations which makes it sufficient in answering all cultural, economic, political and social questions related to African people. Moreover, it has been established that the concept of African epistemology and ontology cherishes that culture plays an important role in cognitive knowledge of reality. The ontological commitments of a culture have also been deemed essential in order to appreciate and understand the role and nature of such ontological commitments. In essence, epistemic disobedience promotes the need for African people to reassert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity and that can only be achieved through the adoption of Afrocentricity.

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