The Importance of an African Centered Education
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This topic requires us to ask a question first, not just the obvious question of "What is an African centered education?" but what is required is posing the even more profound question: "An African centered education for whom and for what purpose?"

I do not presuppose that a hypothetical African centered education is in and of itself of major value unless we know whom and what we are speaking about as both the subjects and the objects of that education, and unless we are clear on what is the purpose of such an education. My contention is that audience and purpose are the two least discussed sides of the African education triangle, whose third side is the content or curriculum of African centered education. Except for a brief comment at the end, I will focus my presentation on the questions of identity and goals.

The dominant society Euro-centric educational modality presupposes that their education system is good for everyone, and if not good for everyone in the abstract, is de facto required of everyone over whom they have dominion, which is a large percentage of the world. Second, the dominant society presupposes that their education is a requirement of civilization. Unfortunately, many of us who reject Euro-centric educational information, often adopt Euro-centric educational methods and philosophy. We presuppose that audience is not a major question and that a dominating intent is a given.

In addition to defining African centered education in terms of philosophy and curriculum, when we address this issue of African education it seems to me to be important for us to also clarify who the "we" of African education is and what is our purpose in obtaining an African centered education. Answering those two concerns, i.e., the identity of the audience and the intended goal of achieving education, will enable us to realistically define "African centered education" grounded in the context of functionality rather than abstracted into the context of rhetoric and fantasy.

Audience/Identity

Let us first, then, consider the question of the identity of our audience, which, of course, presupposes, that we identify ourselves. First of all, my concern for Africa is defined by Africa the people and not simply Africa the land. Wherever we are and whatever we do, taken in its totality, that defines what Africa is.

Our ancient civilizations are important but they are not the sole criterion. Indeed, to the degree that our traditional life did not enable us to withstand the blows of the empire, to the degree that our traditional gods did not enable us to reject the missionary impulses or at the very least incorporate the new god into our beliefs rather than having the new god dictate the rejection of our traditions, to the degree that our traditional values and beliefs collaborated with the

European invaders, to that same degree I suggest there are African traditions which at best, need to be modified and, perhaps, even ought to be discarded.

My first position is that I celebrate people and my second position is that I am critical not just of my historic enemies but also I am, and indeed must be, self-critical.

I do not buy the myth of race, the myth of racial universality, the myth of dualism, i.e., a thing, a person, an action is *ipso facto* either good or bad, and is not subject to transformation nor contextualization. I believe in the traditional African dialectic, which recognizes that everything is contextual and all things are capable of transformation.

Moreover, I believe, nationalism as currently practiced is not only a dead end in terms of social development, I believe nationalism as currently practiced is ultimately a socially negative philosophy that inevitably invites the demarcation of territory and the raising of the flag of individual ownership of the earth.

There are no African countries in Africa. Each one of those countries is European defined entities which, at best, are administered by Africans, and usually Africans who are European educated. In fact, the concept of African as we speak of it, is itself a European concept, a bundling together of various peoples and beliefs under a racist label to facilitate colonialism. There will be no true African nationalism until the nation states of Africa are redesigned to facilitate the development of African people rather than maintained as a leftover form of colonial domination, forms which were established to serve the interest of English, French, Portuguese, and to a lesser extent German and Belgium colonizers.

So, I suppose, now is as good a time as any to deal with the question of what do we mean by African. What is an African? Is this a racial definition? Is this a cultural definition? Is this a political definition based on historical relations of the last five or six hundred years?

Obviously, whether we want to or not, we must confront this issues of self-definition head on. For example, are mulattos, i.e., mixed blood Africans any less African than those who are unmixed? Be careful how you answer, because it is not our way to exclude. If we look around the room it is obvious that we African Americans are a mulatto people - not by choice in most instances, but regardless we are mixed. Does that make us a mulatto people any less African than continental Africans?

The first task of an African centered education is to help us define what being African is. I believe that Africans, and all other people, are defined by color, culture and consciousness.

Color is a racial definition, race in the sense of breeding population, a group of people with common genetic roots. I also believe that rather than create sub-categories, and sub-categories, and breakdowns to the point of absurdity such as quadroons, octoroons, etc., we should acknowledge quite simply a normative standard. For me, African is inclusive. One can racially claim Africa if some (although not necessarily all) of one's ancestors are racially African

and if one chooses to continue that racial identity. My qualifying "and" quite simply recognizes that if a single person who is racially African decides to dissolve him or herself into another group, be they Asian or European, then, over generations, the individual's Africaness will cease to be an issue. In fact, my caveat is that color is not an individual definition but is a group and generational definition.

Culture is a way of life, again defined by normative or group standards. The culture one exhibits is the culture that defines the person. We can learn, understand, and relate to many different cultures, but in the final analysis it is our social living which determines which culture we are. Most human beings are born into a culture, but it is also possible to adopt a culture, and over generations become native to the adopted culture.

Consciousness is the critical element, particularly in the context of liberation. We must be aware of our people and culture, accept our people and culture, and immerse ourselves in our people and culture. Awareness means more than simple experiencing. Indeed one can witness and not understand, just as one can understand without being a witness. The best is to both witness, i.e., experience, and to understand, i.e., critically reflect on the culture. Given the reality of colonialism and neo-colonialism, it is impossible to be African in the modern world without being socially conscious of what it means to be African, what racism means, what colonialism means. To be African is to be self-reflective.

Thus I define African in terms of color, culture and consciousness.

African Identification within the Context of the United States

I believe that there are three major categories of social identification for African Americans in the context of the United States in the last quarter of the 20th century. First, there is the question of race, and more precisely, the question of racism. Racism has undeniable affected every area of our lives, and to the degree that an education does not address or avoids addressing the reality and effects of racism, to that same degree such an education risks being irrelevant, regardless of its nomenclature or subject matter. So then in a modern context, an African centered education will analyze and offer methods of coping with, if not out and out destroying, racism.

Second, there is the question of class stratification and class identification. Class stratification refers to a person or group's economic identity vis-a-vis the economic or productive forces of that society. It is not simply a question of income. It is also a question of where one fits in relation to maintaining the economic status quo. A professional, a public school teacher or corporate secretary, may make a smaller hourly wage than a carpenter, but the professional has had to undergo specific social training in addition to skill development.

The professional is expected to be more "civilized," more "mannered" than the laborer. What does that mean? It means quite simply that part of being a professional is identifying with and adopting the social values of the dominant society. Indeed, the professional is responsible for propagating those values. In many ways the professionals are priests of the status quo. So

then when we talk about a class analysis, income alone can be misleading. We should make an analysis of the relationship to and function on behalf of the economic status quo. An African centered education must attack capitalism, the economic philosophy which elevates the bottom line (or material acquisition) as the measure of social development rather than social relations within a society as the measure of social development.

Third is the question of gender relations. I believe that the establishment of the patriarchy, i.e., male domination of women, was the first battle waged by Europeans in their attempt to colonize the world. Indeed, their whole mythology begins with overthrowing matriarchy wherever it existed. Greek legends of the gods, Zeus raping Europa, or giving birth to a female god sprung from his forehead, are all nothing more than mythological rationalizations of patriarchal dominations.

Christianity and Islam continue this trend introduced by the Greeks. Christianity foes so far as to propagate the myth that a man is a "mother," specifically that Adam, a man, through the intercession of god, gave birth to Eve, a woman. Furthermore, most classical Christian theology does not recognize women as fit to act as intermediaries to and representatives of god. Islam's virulent strain of misogyny is even more oppressive. This question of gender relations also raises the issue of heterosexism in the form of violence against homosexuals for no other reason than homosexuals are different and not like normal people. An African centered education would elevate matriarchy and attack patriarchy.

Although anyone of these three strains could be explored at some length that is not the focus under consideration here. I simply wanted to identify the three major lines of social demarcation in the contemporary context.

Before moving on, I do think it important to point out, that one can be anti-racist but be capitalist and sexist, or could be anti-capitalist and be racist and sexist. I am saying that a progressive position on one side of the triangle, does not guarantee a progressive position on the other sides -- and, yes, I am defining as progressive, ideological and social struggle around anti-sexism and opposition to heterosexism, particularly opposition to so-called homophobia.

Goals

Finally, on this question of relevance, my basic contention is that in order for an African centered education to be meaningful it needs to be focused on development, meeting the needs of the working class masses of our people, both the employed and the unemployed, rather than focus on the career development of African American professionals, particularly those professionals whose day to day work is within the context of predominantly, dominant culture, educational and business institutions. Moreover, African centered education should definitely be opposed to the development of a Black bourgeoisie, a Black class of owners who profit off the exploitation of the African masses.

If an African centered education does not specifically address itself to the needs of our people then it has failed to be relevant to the struggle although it may have great relevance to individuals in their quest for tenure, for promotions, and for political office. As Sonia Sanchez so eloquently noted a number of years ago in evaluating a position put forth by some well-meaning brothers, we should respond to all advocated of ungrounded and non-contemporary Afrocentricity with this phrase. "Uh-huh, but how does that free us!"

How does that free us is precisely the question to ask -- especially when we are clear on who "us" is. I am not interested in joining any atavistic, nostalgic society that knows more about what happened four thousand years ago, four thousand miles away than it does about what happened forty years ago within a four mile radius of where we meet today. The purpose of calling on our ancestor is to sustain life in the present and insure life in the future, and not simply nor solely to glorify the past.

Our people have very real needs today. We are faced with very real problems. For instance, as quiet as it's kept, African American women are quickly becoming the number one victim of AIDS. This coupled with the dramatic rise in breast cancer deaths among African American women suggests a fundamental area of struggle far more important than arguing whether Alice Walker is dipping her nose in other people's business in her crusade against female sexual mutilation.

At the same time, I must note, that quite clearly, a contemporarily grounded African centered education would not only support the struggle against female sexual mutilation, it would also offer an analysis of that phenomenon and point out that sexual mutilation is strongest in those areas of Africa where Islam is the strongest. Part of what we are witnessing is the brutalness of male domination of women, regardless of the fact that, on the surface it may seem like, women are willingly participating. We African Americans surely can understand self-collaboration in oppression, we who have a long and regrettable history of house negroism.

I reiterate the need to be self-critical and the need to be grounded in the lives of our people. Far too many Afrocentrics are petit bourgeoisie professionals who are based at predominantly Eurocentric educational institutions. Far too much of the focus of contemporary Afrocentrism is on the long ago and far away. Where is the community base? Where is the focus on the needs of the community? To a certain extent, much of what we see in some narrow Afrocentric theorists is an attempt to compensate for years spent suffering under the constant and withering intellectual onslaught of formal education teaching Black professionals that Black people are intellectually inferior. After one has invested so many years in academe, one sometimes spends an equally inordinate amount of time researching to prove to Whites that Black people are not only as smart as Whites, but indeed that we were the world's first smart people. "Uh huh, but how does that free us?"

The issue is not about proving anything to Whites. The issue is meeting the needs of our people, being grounded in our people. Furthermore, the inordinate amount of energy devoted to the study, praising, and admiration of African kings and pharaohs displays a serious sense of

inadequacy and disdain for the common woman and man. What difference does it make to me how smart the leader was if the majority of the people are kept in ignorance? I don't care what the priests knew about life, what did Ayo and Kwaku know, what did Bertha and Joe know?

I don't care how intelligent and spiritually refined the royal order was, what were the conditions, relative level of educational achievement and qualitative life of the people who were like you and I? Tell me about the lives of the masses, what we didn't, what we did. Let us learn from our mistakes and build on our achievements in the context of building serious social relationships among ordinary people rather than this almost mystical interest in kings and things.

I agree with Amilcar Cabral that the focus of the African professional ought to be to commit class suicide. Rather than identify with the dominant society via a focus on developing professional skills for the purpose of being a more productive professional or for self-aggrandizement, professionals ought to focus their skills on the uplift and development of the African American working class (whether actively employed or unemployed). This is what DuBois had in mind as a mission for the so-called "talented tenth." Today, too many who would qualify as talented tethers on the basis of education have deserted the mission and it was the mission, and not the level of educational attainment, which defined the talented tenth in DuBois' perspective.

Mission fulfillment is not a question to be taken lightly, because it is no small not straight forward task to work in the interest of one's people if most of the work opportunities are controlled by our oppressors and exploiters, and if the remuneration, both monetarily and socially, are so meager when one works in a predominately and/or all Black setting, that one is not able to sustain one's self. We are faced with the task not only of waging political struggle but also we must engage in the very real struggle of economic support for one's self and for those whom one has the responsibility of sheltering, rearing, or otherwise nurturing, not to mention economic support of the struggle itself. There is a subjective reality of survival involved in committing class suicide. But greater than the subjective question of individual survival is the objective question of group direction.

The upliftment of the masses does not mean that our task is to turn our brothers and sisters into "junior Europeans" (to quote Kgositsile). The upliftment of our people does not mean that we are trying to civilize anyone, or to teach them how to wear business suits and ties, or to show them how to pay taxes and speak properly. In fact, it means quite the opposite. The upliftment of our people means securing and returning to the hands of our people the power to define and determine our own lives. Upliftment quite simply means to end outside domination and exploitation, and to reintroduce our people as the subjects, the makers and shapers of their own destiny.

In order to fulfill the mission the petit bourgeois, the professionals, the educated, will have to physically and psychologically reintegrate themselves into the day to day life of the people who they hope to uplift. They will have to speak to and with working people about an expanded sense of the world and our ability to actively participate in building the future. Additionally, they

will also have to listen to and respond to the concerns, aspirations, and ideas of the working people. In short they will have to be organizers who both bring information and skills to serve our people as well as receive sustenance and inspiration to keep on developing. In short, we are talking about the particular (the professional) and the general (the people) engaged in a dialectic of self-development and self-empowerment that neglects neither and enriches both -- properly speaking a European language is not a prerequisite of this process.

Note: This paper was first presented in the early 90s at a Gwen Brooks Writers Conference.