



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies

August 2020 – Volume 1 Issue 1

An Afro Humanity Approach to Education: When We Tell Our Story

Agya Boakye-Boaten

University of Cape Coast, Ghana (U.S. Fulbright Scholar, '19-20)

University of North Carolina Asheville

The story of Africa and Africans since the European modernity project, which started in the 15th century, has been told with one major aim: to diminish Africans and Africanity, and place European imperialism as the center of our humanity. The African story through Eurocentric narratives and epistemic structures has sought to justify European barbarity as civilizing, enlightening and rational, and Africans and Africanity as obscurantist and primitive. Thus, the African story has been a European fantasy project, one that imagined Africans as sub-humans, and subjected their humanness to non-humanity, a process that manifested in the peculiar institution of slavery, colonization, and coloniality. Africa, Africans, and people of African descent continue the struggle of extricating themselves from the tentacles of the European modernity project. This project, which was built on the otherization and dehumanization of the African, created a distorted image of Africa and Africans, and from which they still bear the scars. In the paper, I use African to refer to all peoples of Africa and of African descent, and whose locus of enunciation “the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213) is Africa.

The encounter of Africans with Europeans at the onset of the European modernity project was not that of an encounter among equals, neither was it a peaceful and civil one. Indeed, countless European scholars have exposed the epistemic foundations which continue to inform the African playbook. For instance, David Hume, the most respected British philosopher, and Immanuel Kant, considered to be the greatest philosopher of modern times, in their writings considered the African to be in the realm of sub-humanity. For instance, Hume in 1753 wrote in a note attached to his essay “Of National Characters” that:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the

ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, still have something eminent about them, in their valor, form of government, or some other particular. (p. 629)

Kant (1764) also wrote that:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to adduce a single example where a Negro has demonstrated talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries, although very many of them have been set free, nevertheless not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality, while among the whites there are always those who rise up from the lowest rabble and through extraordinary gifts earn respect in the world. So essential is the difference between these two human kinds, and it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to color. (p. 59)

The inevitability of the destruction of the African is set in motion, in spite of the universally declared aspirational ideals of Enlightenment, liberty, equality, fraternity or as the French will put it *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. It is obvious that Africans were not considered to be part of the European fraternity of humanity, thus these ideals were inapplicable to them, paving the way for the reemergence and institutionalization of the medieval era system of brutality and cruelty to be unleashed on the Africans.

Armed with the bible and the gun, Europeans descended on Africa and Africans with a sense of superiority and divine entitlement sanctioned by *Romanus Pontifex*, written by Pope Nicholas V. They discounted the humanity of Africans, their cultures, epistemologies, cosmologies, and embarked on a systemized destruction and dehumanization of the African and Africanity. In his book *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* Lerone Bennett (1966) recounts a cataclysmic encounter between Henry the Navigator's men and some Africans. He writes:

There, on a fateful day in 1444, Henry's men came upon the first large group of Africans. They tiptoed through the high grass and crept to the edge of the village and then, said a contemporary, "they looked towards the settlement and saw that the Moors, with their women and children, were already coming as quickly as they could out of their dwellings, because they had caught sight of their enemies. But they, shouting out 'St. James,' 'St. George,' 'Portugal,' attacked them, killing and taking all they could." The pious Portuguese captured seventy more Africans, including a girl they found sleeping in a deserted village, and sailed home, where they baptized the captives and enslaved them. (p. 32)

This was the epic transformation of the destinies of Africans within the European modernity project. For the next four centuries, African bodies will be commodified, vilified and dehumanized to fuel the economic revolution of Europe and America. Africans were also subjugated through epistemic racism and humiliation. For instance, Nkrumah (1964) posits that:

The history of Africa, as presented by European scholars, has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. It was said that

whereas other continents had shaped history, and determined its course, Africa had stood still, held down by inertia; that Africa was only propelled into history by European contact. (p. 62)

The commodification of African bodies meant the destruction of Africans and Africanity. Maquet (1974) defines Africanity as “the unique cultural face that Africa presents to the world” (p. 8). Here, I define Africanity as the ontological, epistemological, and cosmological foundations of Africans. Africanity is the collective experience of global Africa that seeks to recenter Africanness and extricate itself from Eurocentric distortions and control. This means Africans should be Afrocentric in thinking and doing. Asante (2013) maintains that to recenter our Africanness, we must use “all linguistic, psychological, sociological, and philosophical elements to defend African cultural elements” (p. 43). Therefore, it is imperative to engage in a new African consciousness, a paradigm, which reclaims the humanity of Africans through rememory, re-culture, and reclamation, a process I refer to as the 3Rs.

All human cultures are built on foundations that hold the key to the survival of the group. These foundations hold the sacred remedies through which the collective welfare of the group may be found. The beginnings of all things set the tone for future manifestations. Africans everywhere need to understand that the collective thriving of their people is inextricably linked to the foundations of their humanity. African humanity started not as a European project, but proud people who paved the way for the survival of all humanity. Africans were the first humans to engage nature for survival. Their pioneering skills and art of survival will guarantee the survival of all human species. Bennett (1966) writes “Negroes, or people who would be consider Negroes today, were among the first people to use tools, paint pictures, plant seeds and worship gods” (p. 5). This is the Africa, a continent and its people who were pioneering in our humanity, that we need to remember. This is the Africa that we need to teach Africans on the continent and diaspora to be proud of. This is the Africa we need to extricate from the Eurocentric fallacies and distortions. Europe has created an imperial universalistic epistemological superiority which projects its very limited worldview as “universal truths” and renders African epistemologies as inferior and at times even nonexistent. Ignoring our Africanity and centering Eurocentrism as the basis of our human existence and experience has been the most destructive European project from which we desperately need to recover. Africa and Africans need to remember their golden ages when African productions were bold, innovative, and devoid of negative European domination and influences. We need to rememory. To rememory is to know what it was before it was destroyed. As Morrison (1987) opined:

I used to think to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (p.35)

Africans have been assaulted and continue to suffer from the legacies of these onslaughts, but Africa never died. In fact, Africa will also be in an African individual, whether they acknowledge or not. This is what needs to be harnessed through rememory. Rememory is a

powerful tool to combat the systematic erasure of the African from the history of humanity, and to properly position the contributions of Africans in the birth of our human civilization.

Furthermore, Africans will have to engage in reculturing. This is a return to the basics, that is ReAfricanizing our entire humanity to reflect our Africanity—the ontological, epistemological and cosmological foundations of Africans. Africans were created uniquely; they were created African; why would anyone want to be different than who they were created to be? The European remains European, so why would the African not want to be African? Well, the answer is simple. A five-century sustained assault on Africans and Africanity is enough to have doubt about the self, and unconsciously participate in systems that continue to perpetuate these distortions. Europeans view themselves and the world through European lenses. It is about time African viewed themselves and the world through African lenses. There has to be new set of ideas, norms, mores, and value systems, which are neither in opposition nor in conformity to Eurocentrism. This should be an unequivocal delinking from the strangulation of Eurocentrism, which is the very foundation of the subjugation of Africans.

Parochialism and provincialism are the bedrocks of Eurocentrism, yet are projected as objective and universal. This means what is African is subjected through grossly limited and myopic European lenses for authentication, sanitization, and an eventual end product, which is distorted and not founded in Africanity. These Eurocentric characterizations of what is African have had dire consequences on African cultural reproductions, representations, and identities, and in most cases have been constructed to appease European sensibilities and authentication. This is why we need a reculturalization to develop a sense of self that is not a reactionary construct to the European epoch in Africa. Reculturalization process must center Africanity in all its forms and complexities that give the African a sense of pride and self-worth. A reculturalization process rethinks, reorganizes, and repositions African experiences as positive experiences of resilience, resistance, and reclamation in spite of centuries of systematized institutionalized destructiveness of European domination. A renaissance that produces a collectivist unified African, whose consciousness, sensibilities, actions, and deeds are reflected in Africanity, or in Afro humanism, Ubuntu, a Zulu word, which translates as “I am because we are”. Indeed, Harold Cruse (1984) suggests that "as long as the Negro's identity is in question, or open to self-doubts, then there can be no positive identification with the real demands of his political and economic existence" (p. 13).

Who and what we are as Africans will always be complicated due to our distorted histories. But it ought not be this complicated unless there are forces staunchly against any form of African unification. What is it about the African that evokes some of the most visceral and vociferous reactions, especially at the thought of an independently thinking African? An African unrestrained and unapologetic about expressing their Africanity. An African who wants to delink from the shackles of European intellectual and spiritual entanglement. One who wants to be truly free to express their Africanity without appeasement and fear. This is the African that needs to recreate a new sense of self, built on its original foundation of their being.

Perhaps the most insidious function of the European project was the creation of an epistemological system in which Africans initially had no option but to be forced into it. This epistemological system, built on the faulty premise of African inferiority and European

superiority, unfortunately continues to manifest in systems and institutions of learning today. In other words, Africans everywhere are captives of epistemological systems that were created with them as subhuman, yet they are still willingly participating in them. Some Africans continue to buy into an Afro-deficit model, which creates the illusion that there was nothing there. But for the benevolence of the European modernity project, Africans could not be part of the modern world, a world defined only by European terms. Africans have bought into this and strive to function within this false premise. Thus, Africans can only express their humanity through their acceptance of European humanism, the very foundation of the destruction of African humanity. This means the African can only be part of the European modernity project through a process of deAfricanization and embracing the very system built on their dehumanization. No wonder the African continues to exist in a state of confusion, and their existence subjected to the whims of the European modernity project. It will be impossible to not exist in a world that was created solely for the benefit of one group. But we ought not to live according to their terms. Shying away from our core humanistic value systems is the surest way to maintain the subordinated status of Africans.

Africans cannot afford not to be Africans. A return to African humanity is the only way to reclaim our Africanity. This is a process that starts with an introspective reengagement of our African consciousness, Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” This should manifest in our families, our communities, and our institutions. We need to reengage our collectivist orientation as a people. We need to go back and reclaim. We ought not to be ashamed—that is the very idea promulgated by the European modernity project, to isolate us from our beings. Why do we “learn” only to depart from our core humanity and embrace a humanity that was formed in opposition to our humanness? As we acknowledge the “400 Year of Return”, we must use that as an opportunity to Reclaim us, Think African, Do African and Be African.

References

Asante, M.K. (2013). *An Afrocentric Manifesto*. Hoboken, NJ: Polity.

Bennett, L. (1966). *Before the Mayflower. A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964*. Baltimore: Penguin Books

Cruse, H. (1984). *The crisis of the Negro intellectual*. New York: Allen & Wilson.

Grosfoguel, K. (2007) The Epistemic Decolonial Turn, *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3, 211-223

Hume, D. (1985). *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (1 ed. 1742;1777), ed. Miller, E. F. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Kant, I. ([1764] 2011) Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime. In: Frierson, P, Guyer, P (eds) Immanuel Kant. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11–62.

Maquet, J. (1974). *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Oxford University Press.

Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf.

Nkrumah, K. (1964). Consciencism. *Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*. London: Heinemann

Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Agya Boakye-Boaten, University of North Carolina Asheville, email: aboaten@unca.edu .