

## **The Afrocentric Project: The Quest for Particularity and the Negation of Objectivity**

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This article is a philosophical critique of a very controversial paradigm within Africana Studies. The methodology employed in this paper is a philosophical critique of the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of Afrocentricity. The quest for a distinctive (metaphysical) Africanist perspective has cast Afrocentricity as a subjectivist approach to affirming the integrity of an Africana existential condition. While in the course of African American intellectual history a number of scholars and thinkers have supported the notion of a unique Black metaphysics, Afrocentricity brings to the table a particular approach to the tradition of affirming an African metaphysical exclusivism. What I mean by the quest for particularity is the notion that there is a unique Africana presence in the world, such that it stands antithetical to the European/Western experience. I explore what I call "weak Afrocentricity," i.e., a cultural determinism demarcating the African and European experience. Afrocentricity, in positing a cultural relativism, renders that not only is Eurocentrism a false universality, but that universality per se is false. This denial of universality (at the ontological level) has as a corresponding category the negation of objectivity (at the epistemological plane). I examine the works of two leading Afrocentric proponents, Molefi Asante and Marimba Ani, arguably two of the most significant contributors to the philosophical foundations of Afrocentricity.

All discussion of ethnicity within the domain of a global perspective necessarily requires us to move to the plane, implicitly or explicitly, of a world view. The emergence of Afrocentricity as a philosophical world view, i.e., a theoretically substantiated world view consisting of the most general categories involving nature, society, human existence, and thought, is most saliently a global approach to the existential matter of an African grounding in the world.

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All attempts, all quests to affirm the human existence of African Americans *vis-a-vis* the claims of racism and national chauvinism ultimately center on the question, what counts as belonging to the world? The nationalist response (of which Afrocentricity is a species) brings the question of belonging to the world to the forefront. American nationalism is discarded and in its place some form of African nationalism becomes preeminent. Malcolm X's statement, "We are not American but victims of Americanism" graphically gives expression to the nationalist rejection of Euro-American national chauvinism. His privileging of human over civil rights has a crucial cultural counterpart, the legitimization of an African American cultural heritage as an autonomous tradition. For the Afrocentrists, what counts as belonging to the world is the existential affirmation of an Africanity which entails determinate ontological, epistemological, and axiological implications. This quest is one which has its grounding in a national rather than a liberal democratic paradigm. In terms of intellectual culture, the Afrocentric intellectual imperative moves beyond inclusion in America to what can be best described as a critique and corrective of the traditional academic canon. This critique and corrective are the first steps toward the affirmation of African particularity. For the so-called integrationist (read assimilationists), this central question remains in a mediated form. What counts as belonging to the world finds immediate expression in provincial terms, entailed in the more parochial question, what counts as belonging to America? Hence the struggle for civil rights and inclusion into the mainstream of American life, including the canon(s) of intellectual culture, are viewed as a necessary and sufficient condition for the quest of belonging in the world.

The integrationist is fueled by a firm belief and conviction that this country is in an essential way a good, if not the greatest, place for one to live. America's prime failure, its greatest blemish, for the integrationist, is its racism. The integrationist maxim is simply-eliminate racism and true democracy will surely flourish. The integrationist fully embraces the liberal democratic paradigm. Nevertheless, the problem faced by the integrationist is the failure of liberal democracy to embrace Black people as Americans. Langston Hughes' poem, "I Too Sing America," is a stirring expression of the integrationist protest against such rejection. In terms of intellectual culture, i.e., the Euro-American academy, the imperative is inclusionary, the push for more Black faces in the academy and in textbooks, e.g., affirmative action and multicultural education.

The Afrocentric critique and corrective call into question the academy's canon, i.e., the prescribed corpus of literature which functions as the academy's foundational elements. The Afrocentric project is engaged in a cultural war over the anchor of attendant assumptions and presuppositions undergirding the academy. Hence, the mere act of inclusion, of making provision for courses on the Africana experience, falls drastically short of the Afrocentrist's aim of reconstituting the very

basis of what has functioned as the higher learning. Ergo, Afrocentricity is not merely an academic addendum, better yet, it calls for a reconfiguration of the whole, traditional, academic enterprise. Afrocentricity boldly shifts the discourse on Africana Studies from the margins to the mainstream of academic and intellectual life.

This paper is a philosophical critique of Afrocentricity. What I mean by the quest for particularity comprises more than the explication of particularity via a descriptive presentation of the uniqueness of the Africana (here Africana is inclusive of the diasporian experience) locus in the world but, as well, entails a critical discourse on discursive practices relating to Black Studies, i.e., Africana, African, or African American Studies. What is pivotal to this discourse is the repudiation of all scholarship on the Black experience which relegates and restrains this experience to the level of an object of investigation. The Afrocentric project seeks to counter such objectification by proffering distinctive discursive practices which go beyond the pale of the traditional disciplines in the academy. The determination of such discursive practices, theories, and methodologies, the Afrocentrists posit, in the final analysis, (if not immediately) derives from the African experience. Hence Black Studies, Afrocentrists claim, is a disciplinary focus and is parasitic upon an Afrocentric paradigm.

Several central points are contained in my notion of a philosophical critique of the Afrocentric project. First, this critique is from a definitive philosophical perspective, *viz.*, dialectical materialism.

Second, the Afrocentric project contains a plurality of intellectual threads, which form a fabric of thought, which at best can be described as a mosaic, i.e., individual threads which maintain distinguishable qualities regarding analytical premises, emphasis, scope, and direction, yet all are woven together, and a common ontological, epistemological, and axiological fabric, i.e., a worldview or *weltanschauung*. My critique focuses on a composite sketch of the mosaic rather than a detailed examination of the various threads and strands, though I give particular attention to Molefi Asante's contributions due to his prominence as the intellectual systematizer of Afrocentricity, along with Marimba Ani's recent magnum opus, *Yurugu*. Arguably, their works constitute a formidable philosophical bedrock for the Afrocentric project.

Third, given the mosaic character of the Afrocentric project, I distinguish between a weak and a strong Afrocentricity. This line of demarcation emanates from what I view as a metaphysical exclusivism whose focus is the bifurcation of historical and cultural reality into a mutually exclusive relationship between the African and European cultural matrix. This juxtaposition, when expressed in strong Afrocentricity, finds its catalyst in either an environmental determinism, e.g., the thesis of sun versus ice people or a biogenetic causal theory where melanin (or better yet the lack of it) is said to have generated social, cultural, and psycho-

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logical antithesis and antagonism, i.e., white supremacy looms hegemonic over Africans and their descendants. In contrast, weak Afrocentricity has a propensity to locate this metaphysical differentiation, *au fond*, in sociocultural structures and/or ideologies (world views). This latter thread is, what may be termed, cultural determinism. This contrast of strong and weak Afrocentricity should not be taken pejoratively. Here, the terms weak and strong are used merely as heuristic devices to formulate typology for, or as a mode of discriminating, the types of threads in the Afrocentric mosaic.

Fourth, my critique is focused on the Afrocentrist project as a quest for the affirmation of African particularity where such an affirmation entails a critique of Eurocentrism as false universality. The Afrocentrist critique of Eurocentrism as false universality is grounded on a cultural relativist stance, which in turn eschews the possibility of ascertaining universality *per se*. Universality, for the Afrocentric project, is a false proposition and, hence, is relegated to the level of a pseudo problem. This ontological dismissal of universality has an epistemological counterpart, *viz.*, the negation of any notion of objectivity beyond the confines of one's cultural matrix. The only epistemologically valid realm of inquiry for Afrocentrism, it is argued, is the African (and its attendant diasporian) experience. Additionally, a corollary claim is made for Eurocentrism; it can only have epistemological validity within the terrain of the European (Western) experience. My critical analysis is directed at how the Afrocentric project grounds and justifies its claim that universality, as such, is a false proposition and objectivity (objective truth) cannot be obtained outside of a given cultural matrix. The foundation for these claims rests in assuming a metaphysical exclusivism and an essentialist approach to both the African and European experience. What results is a historiography, established by means of a static or synchronic methodology, which strips both the African and European cultural heritages of their dialectical (dynamic and contradictory) development.

### **The Afrocentric Critique of Eurocentrism**

Molefi Asante, in his *The Afrocentric Idea*, states that his work is "a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view . . ." <sup>1</sup> So his critique is aimed at Eurocentrism as false universality. He further states, "I am not questioning the validity of the Eurocentric tradition within its context . . ." <sup>2</sup> His claim is that Eurocentrism has epistemological validity if, and only if, it is restricted to a European (Western) domain. The Afrocentric critique, *prima facie*, does not question the legitimacy of Eurocentrism *qua* Europe; however, if we go beneath this appearance, we will find Asante intimately engaged in giving commentary on European discourse. This engagement in European dis-

course is an intellectual imperative which derives from the effort to erect a philosophical foundation for the Afrocentric project. So despite his seemingly centrist perspective and commitment to cultural relativism, Asante enters the waters of European discourse and discursive practice. His entrance is ostensibly to describe, for us, the Eurocentric tradition. Asante's discussion and interpretation of the polemic between positivism and critical theory has import because he argues his Afrocentric critique and (European) critical theory "are engaged in a somewhat similar enterprise in reorienting thinking."<sup>3</sup> Yet he tenders this caveat: Despite critical theory assaults on the pitfalls of positivism, this polemic is an "Eurocentric family debate over the nature of ideology."<sup>4</sup> So the similarity between Afrocentrism and critical theory is only a surface appearance that when explicated (deconstructed) renders demarcated cultural ontologies undergoing quite different intellectual enterprises.

Granted, this debate originates within the European intellectual tradition (as does the Marxist/Freudian polemic which Asante also comments on); nevertheless I am compelled to bring into bold relief the glaring fact, that today these polemics are not constrained by its European origins. Indeed, the above polemics are presently waged on an international (global) plane outside of the European/Western cultural terrain. So the fact remains that the genesis of aforesaid polemics does not, in any way, confine their epistemological validity and veracity narrowly to European (Western) concerns. Asante charges critical theorists with arrogance due to their ignorance or lack of appreciation of the African conception of the unity of reality. Even if we assume the veracity of this claim, the question before us is how does a failure to appreciate **the** African conception of the unity of reality become equivalent to arrogance and thus Eurocentrism? The Afrocentric critique of Eurocentrism here involves a conflation of categories where, by virtue of their European origin, all such categories must be seen as Eurocentrist. Just as Asante argues elsewhere to be African is not necessarily to be Afrocentric, would not this hold true for Europeans and Eurocentrism?<sup>5</sup> What then is Eurocentrism? How may we discern the difference between what is simply European from Eurocentrism? Is one's engagement in the European intellectual tradition a sufficient condition for making the charge of Eurocentrism? In Molefi's analysis, there is no exemplar of a *differentia specifica* which we may employ to discriminate between the two. So the critical theory/positivist and the Marxist/Freudian debates are described within the Eurocentric tradition because of the simple identity (conflation) of the categories European and Eurocentrist. For Asante, the critique of Eurocentrism is not a process whereby what is European is differentiated from Eurocentrism. Asante tells us, "[t]he invalidity of an idea arises, not from its exponents, but from its own fundamental flaws."<sup>6</sup> I strongly agree with this assertion, however, and unfortunately, Asante fails to follow his own assertion and instead falls into the trap of the genetic

fallacy. A genetic fallacy is one whereby the genesis of an idea becomes the basis for its invalidity. In this case, the European origin of ideas is a sufficient condition to claim Eurocentrism. Here it is important to note this same line of reasoning continues with his rejection of Marxism. He argues, "[b]ut because it [Marxism] emerged from the western consciousness, Marxism is mechanical in its approach to social understanding and development. . ."7 The assumption not only entails that Marxism is mechanical (despite Marxist dialectics), but it includes the ludicrous presupposition that Western consciousness *per se* is intrinsically mechanical. Asante's essentialist method in describing and analyzing both European and African thought is what is most mechanical here. He ignores the long history of intellectual exchange and specifically philosophical discourse in Europe where there were/are many proponents of a dynamic, dialectical approach to nature, society, and thought itself. Marxism was/is a prominent voice in the Western philosophical tradition of dialectical thinking starting from Heraclitus on up to Hegel and even encompassing a number of the critical theorists *a la* the Frankfurt School, a point which was well understood by a wide spectrum of Black philosophers including: William Ferris, George G. M. James, C. L. R. James, Martin Luther King Jr., Charles Leander Hill, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sekou Toure. Consequently, Asante's assertion regarding Western thought as endemically mechanistic manifests both an ignorance of European and Africana intellectual history. A poor commentary for a thinker who seeks to establish a philosophical grounding and a paradigmatic foundation for Africana Studies.

Asante's essentialism does an additional disservice to African realities. An essentialist view of Africa effectively arrests the dialectical constitution and composition of an African heritage and cultural traditions. Rather than his monolithic paradigm (i.e., **the** African conception of unity, reality, values etc.), we have the dialectical interconnection of unity and diversity (the unity of opposites), which brings into focus both the identity and difference which has characterized the African experience from the days of Kemet to the present.

I want to propose a different method for determining not only what is meant by Eurocentrism, but also suggest a way to disclose all forms of centrism. By doing so, it becomes possible to show how one may subject centrism to a critique of its fundamental flaws. My claim is that ethnocentrism is flawed because it centers reality around a given ethnic group. Such centering, by inference, devalues all other groups by virtue of their not being members of the central group. Eurocentrism is a species of ethnocentrism. Here the center becomes Europe (the West) and thus all groups outside of the European (Western) experience are inferentially devalued. My critique is aimed not at Europe, as the point of origin, but at the centrist perspective which relegates all others to a lesser status and place in the world. The danger in Eurocentrism is precisely its

centrist casting. Europe *per se* (as a category) is value neutral. By that I mean socio-cultural phenomena emanating out of Europe, by virtue of their genesis, are neither endemically nor intrinsically good or bad, progressive or reactionary, beautiful or ugly. Following this line of reasoning, Afrocentrism, via its commitment to a centrist paradigm, is a species of ethnocentrism and is subject to the same fundamental flaws of Eurocentrism, *viz.*, devaluing that which is not African. The emergence of false universality (what the Afrocentric project aims to critique and correct) logically follows from the centering of a given group. The privileging (centering) of a given group presupposes all other groups are at best satellites in a cultural orbit around the central group. However, if it is argued that each group by virtue of its own cultural matrix has epistemological validity, as long as it remains within its domain, what results is an ontological formulation whereby reality is seen as a monadology without a Leibnizian pre-established harmony.

This scheme of a universe of centers (centrisms) where autonomy (objectivity) is granted only within the limits of a given cultural matrix is a relativism which directs us into the swamp of subjectivism. The methodological implications for Afrocentrism, *tout court*, is a stringent subjectivism. Asante argues, "I do not castigate any other method, for all methods are valid within their context."<sup>8</sup> This context, for Asante, is a cultural one specifically situating Africa (and Europe) as a cultural whole and, thus, his proposal for centering within an African cultural matrix. The nagging problem for all relativists, and specifically Asante's Afrocentrism, is the paradox of incommensurability. In the case of Afrocentrism, the paradox of the incommensurability is exemplified in the relationship between the cultural heritage of Africa and Europe. If one claims what is true for Europe may be false for Africa and vice versa, then on what basis can we determine truth or falsity? We are confronted with this question since our culture-boundedness constricts us epistemologically, ontologically, and axiologically.

Part of the ambiguity in Asante's undertaking is that he offers opinions on such "Western" intellectual issues and philosophical problems as the mind/body problem and idealism/materialism debate, and professes philosophical judgment on such figures as Protagoras, Aristotle, Sartre, Hegel, Marx, Kuhn, and Feyerabend, among others. Yet his notion of a cultural bound centrist paradigm and cultural relativism, in fact, nullifies any opinion, view, or perspective he may have concerning those persons and issues outside of the African world. In terms of his own cultural relativism, it is axiomatic that if one ventures out of his/her cultural center to participate in any other then that constitutes broaching false universality. It is to take what is an African ideal and apply it to an European reality. The right to speak (or rather rightly speaking) requires residence in a given cultural context. As such, this manifestation of the paradox of incommensurability or relativism simply means there is no way one can



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assert the truth or falsity, the good or bad, the beauty or ugliness of any proposition or thing beyond one's cultural boundaries because there is no common domain or intersecting terrain. Cultural matrix conceived as autonomous centers, islands in themselves, or monads in self-containment, can offer no basis for objective truth or falsity beyond the bounds of a particular culture. Essentially, what is true or false is relative to particularity.

The irony of it all is that the very critique of false universality is undermined because if false universality is a value of Eurocentrism then it may not be false from the standpoint of Eurocentrism. Relative to Eurocentrism, it is a true universality. Correspondingly, it may be relative to Afrocentricity, viewed as a false universality. There is no objective grounds to claim false universality, only relative ground which makes it an either/or proposition. Either its true or false depending on one's cultural reference point.

Asante posits the "problem is not in the expounding of Western categories but in the absolute manner in which they are assumed to constitute the whole of human thought"(false universality).<sup>9</sup> He is at this point differentiating what is European (Western) from Eurocentrism, which is something he had fail to do throughout his earlier discussion. This reference to absolutism is none other than the claim that false universality is Eurocentrism. Now, it is not European categories which are the threat, but absolutism as false universality, hence the danger of centrism in Eurocentrism. The solution to this problem cannot have as its foundation an ontology which, in turn, gives affirmation to a plurality of particularities which have no objective support beyond their limited individual spheres. The critique of absolutism, or false universality, by Afrocentricity is undermined by the very act of its negating the category of objectivity. All particularities, enshrined in a centrist shell, will find their quest unfulfilled by negating the very basis which makes true particularity a reality. The truth of particularity resides in its dialectical relationship to universality. The universal as true universality, over and against false universality, must of logical necessity take into account what it is that makes for the commensurability of differing cultural or social formations. In effect, what does it mean to be human? What is the common denominator or connecting thread linking the world's diverse communities? The need for a category signifying commensurability among different cultural matrixes axiomatically requires a notion of universality and objectivity.

Though Asante may be considered the leading theorist of the Afrocentrist project, the recent contribution of Marimba Ani to the corpus of Afrocentric theoretical formulations is arguably the most substantive work in the critique of Eurocentrism. Her *Yurugu* is both an intensive and extensive rendering of over six hundred pages. Time and space does not allow a detailed examination at this juncture; however, I will address her central thesis by way of summation.<sup>10</sup>



We found that Asante, despite his conflation of the categories European and Eurocentrism, concluded that a line of demarcation was necessary for the real danger consisted in the absolutizing of European categories as universals. Ani, on the other hand, argues that European cultural thought and behavior is intrinsically absolutist. European thought, for Ani, is Eurocentric.

*Yurugu* as a moment in the movement is, no doubt, an apogee in the chorus of voices comprising Afrocentric discursive practices. And though her voice reaches the upper scale and contributes some unique improvisational polish to the Afrocentric ensemble, she is not a mere soloist without accompanying voices. Therefore, it is crucial, in my estimation, to contextualize *Yurugu* as an Afrocentric text. The locus of *Yurugu*, within the typology of strong and weak Afrocentricity, is as a weak Afrocentric text since the overriding principle employed, by Ani, for demarcating the African from the European paradigm is culturally determined. Ani, as an Afrocentric proponent, views the articulation of the African-centered perspective, as a dialectical process, whereby, the negation of European thought is the necessary ground for affirming African thought. She states, "[t]o be truly liberated, African people must come to know the nature of European thought and behavior in order to understand the effect that Europe has had on our ability to think victoriously. We must be able to separate our thought from European thought, so as to visualize a future that is not dominated by Europe."<sup>11</sup>

For Ani, this dialectical process is, on the one hand, "intellectual decolonization", and, on the other, "cultural regeneration." The first pole, "intellectual decolonization" is the explicit critique of Europe, while the second pole, "cultural regeneration", is implicitly contained in the first. Hence, the departure, the rupture from European epistemological presuppositions is a logical priority for the affirmative articulation of an African-centered worldview. With regard to positing a critique of the European cultural matrix, Ani shares a common intellectual space with Chinweizu, Iva Carruthers, George G. M. James, Diop, Olela, and Bernal among others. However, in important respects she takes a fundamentally different twist from James, Diop, Olela, and Bernal in how she situates Western (European) thought generally, and philosophy particularly. When we contextualize *Yurugu* within the terrain of Afrocentric critiques of European philosophy, Ani parts company in an essential way from this tradition. Her departure rests on the foundational assumption that

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Greek philosophy, and specifically Platonic philosophy, is the seminal germ for European imperialism. Whereas Diop, Oléla, James, and Bernal all claim that Greek philosophy, and specifically Platonism, is grounded in, if not a wholesale plagiarism of, African philosophical thought.<sup>12</sup>

My critique is in substance a philosophical one. The constraints of time will limit my discussion to the following points:

1. What is the locus of Platonism in the history of world philosophy? Can it be reasonably demonstrated that Platonism is (or in some sense is) a prototype of Western philosophy?
2. My second point addresses an epistemological problematic. Here my concern centers on the subject/object dialectic wherein Platonic thought demarcates these two categories and argues for the objectification of knowledge. For Plato, this objectification signals the emergence of philosophy as a science of knowledge ("episteme") which stands over and against mythology's merger and subsequent identity of subject and object. Ani upholds the identify of these categories and claims objectivity is mystification. The question before us is, can one reasonably claim that the realist elements in Plato's epistemology constitute a mystical casting of knowledge?

Albeit my critique, *prima facie*, may appear to be a modest undertaking since so much more can be said about a text which is over six hundred pages, I think I can demonstrate there is a sufficient warrant to my critique. My focus is on the philosophical anchors which ground her intellectual undertaking -- philosophical anchors at the level of history of philosophy and epistemology.

### **Platonism and the History of Western Philosophy**

The question before us is, what is the locus of Platonism in the history of philosophy. For Ani, Plato (though influenced by what she terms "pre-Socratic African philosophies") seems to have gone beyond this influence and was the catalyst for a distinctive philosophical stance. She argues,

"[w]hat Plato seems to have done is to have laid a rigorously constructed foundation for the repudiation of the symbolic sense-the denial of cosmic, intuitive knowledge. It is this process that we need to trace, this development in formative European thought which was eventually to have such a devastating effect on the nontechnical aspects of the culture. It led to the *materialization*(*J.H.Mc*) of the universe as conceived by the European

mind--a materialization that complemented and supported the intense psycho-cultural need for control of self and others.<sup>13</sup>

While Ani does not deny African influences on Plato (though she does not state precisely what these influences were), she strongly asserts that Plato was the initial and key European thinker to bring about a paradigmatic shift from an intuitionist to a materialist view of the universe. For Ani, this shift from intuitionism to materialism is not confined to Plato's persona as it becomes the essential feature of European thought. Ani's summation of Plato entails three crucial elements we need to investigate. First, Plato was influenced by African philosophical currents. While she gives no direct evidence in the text of such influences, she does provide references in her first endnote.

The first endnote contains a reference to the Platonic dialogue the *Timaeus*. There is no annotation as to why she makes this reference. One who is modestly educated in Platonic philosophy can infer the reference is made since this dialogue not only makes reference to Egypt, but follows the Egyptian doctrine of the uncreatability of matter. Both James and Obenga, who are also referenced in this endnote, make explicit mention to Egyptian doctrine in their works.<sup>14</sup> What is critical to our discussion is that both Obenga and James (even more vigorously than Obenga) assert an Egyptian influence on Plato.

Second, neither they nor Olela argue that there is an epistemological break dividing Egyptian and Platonic thought, instead they stringently assert a continuity with Egyptian thought. Both James and Olela argue this continuity is based on plagiarism. Now, of course, the failure to observe such an epistemological break in no way makes Ani's claim invalid. But even if we take as a given that they miss the boat and fail to recognize the Platonic epistemological reputation, Ani's further claim that Platonism is materialist does not hold.

While Platonic epistemology is, in fact, a realist view, it is not materialism. Platonic realism is realist because it is an objective idealist stance parasitic upon a rationalist presupposition that mind is not restricted to individual instantiations. Mind for Plato, as with all objective idealists, is a general independent category and not circumscribed by an individual, existential, character.

What Plato calls for in his epistemology is a shift from perceptual to rational cognition. This fact does not imply intuition is absent from Platonic epistemology, for intuition plays a crucial role in his notion of anamnesis or recollection, as we witness in the *Meno*. Hence, Plato's rationalism includes intuition rather than excludes it. Reason has logical priority over intuition, but reason does not negate intuition's presence. In fact, Platonism needs intuition as a crucial component for recollection.

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In the history of philosophy, the resort to anamnesis or recollection is predicated on the notion of innate ideas. Rationalists, since they devalue the role of experience, are intrinsically bound to resort to some notion of innate ideas, since ideas for rationalists are not derived from experiential encounters, as witness in Cartesian rationalism.

Third, Platonism, in the history of philosophy, is not a shift to materialism but idealism. It was precisely the pre-Socratic Ionian thinkers who began the march toward materialist philosophy. Thales, often referred to as the first Greek philosopher if not the first philosopher, studied in Egypt and came back a materialist. His materialism, as James and Olela show, is consistent with Egyptian philosophy. The argument that materialism is a European philosophy, and thus alien to Africa, is not supported by historical evidence. Plato was not a materialist nor is materialism uniquely a European philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

Plato's idealism is in part a response to Heraclitian materialism. The other part of the equation in this response is Parmenides' idealism. What Plato seeks at the epistemological and ontological plane is a critical synthesis of Heraclitus' dialectics and Parmenides' absolute idealism. The critical philosophical question, for Plato, is the reconciliation of the categories of permanence (Parmenides) and change (Heraclitus).

Why has Ani missed the boat regarding Plato's place in the history of philosophy? I think her failure to grasp Platonism in the history of philosophy is due to her methodology. Her method is anthropological not philosophical. Anthropological or sociological reductionism cannot describe or explain philosophical discourse. Her attempts to break from Platonic epistemological restraints requires an epistemological, not an anthropological, analysis. While Plato's philosophical discourse takes place in a social, political, and culture context, and understanding that context is very important, it cannot, however, be a substitute for a concrete philosophical analysis of concrete philosophical problems. To confuse idealism with materialism is an error due to her fundamental ignorance of philosophy. One reason James, Olela, and Obenga do not make the same error is because they understand philosophy and recognize the *differentia specifica* which demarcates philosophy from anthropology. While anthropology and philosophy are not antithetical categories, and indeed work together philosophical anthropology they cannot be conflated. The context of a philosophical doctrine while dialectically related to the content of philosophical discourse cannot be reduced to it.

Plato's idealism was a philosophical response to a concrete constellation of philosophical issues which were intrinsically connected with a host of socio-political problems prevailing in Athens. Plato's attempt at resolving the philosophical antithesis between Heraclitus' dialectical materialism and Parmenides' absolute idealism in its political ramification sought the restoration of an aristocratic landowning ruling class. Thus, any concrete analysis of the specificity of Greek philosophy, any

disclosure of Greek philosophy's *differentia specifica* demarcating it from any other cultural matrix, i.e., an African philosophy cannot be uncovered by Ani's essentialist anthropological methodology. One cannot explain the historical and glaring empirical fact the pre-Socratic **philosophy**, as opposed to **mythology**, was materialist.

Ani's thesis that Europe is a cultural entity accents its cohesiveness, integration (integral unity), and common features. But she does this by a reductionism which asserts, "[b]eneath its deceptive heterogeneity lies a monolithic essence; an essence that accounts for the success of European imperialism."<sup>16</sup>

The heterogeneity of Greek philosophy, for example, is not a deception; it is a historical and an empirical fact. The concrete explanation of this fact requires a method and theory which guides us toward an explanation of what is given and not a simplistic dismissal of the facts. A theory or philosophy of liberation cannot afford to say, "My mind is made up. Don't confuse me with facts." The heterogeneity of Greek philosophy is a fact. How do we, in seeking to understand this fact, explain it?

In part, Ani's confusion is the result conflating Plato's importance and influence in Western philosophy with trying to demonstrate that Platonism is a prototype of European philosophy. The affirmation of the former does not logically lead to the latter. Important and influential philosophical doctrines are not necessarily prototypes for subsequent doctrines, but instead can serve to create differing responses within philosophical traditions. Aldred North Whitehead's statement, "Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato," was not a claim that Platonism is a prototype in Western philosophy (he understood well how Aristotle, for example, sought to dismantle Platonic forms from arid abstractions to a concrete category). Better yet, Platonism was a significant view to which Western philosophers in its wake, in due course, had to respond. However, could not the same be said of Hegel for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Are not Marxist dialectical materialism, Russell's logical atomism, and James' and Dewey's pragmatism, in some way, all responses (footnotes) to Hegel? Surely no one literate in philosophy would claim that Hegelianism is the Western prototype for the nineteenth and twentieth century? Platonism importance and influence cannot be reduced to a prototype.

I want to conclude this discussion on Platonism *locus* in the history of philosophy by returning to the issue of why Ani, in her critique of Plato (and Western philosophy), departs from her Afrocentric forerunners in the persona of James, Diop, Odele, and Bernal. What the latter group did was to point to the continuity of philosophical doctrines; a continuity of philosophical doctrines, in which differences regarding social, political, and cultural context could not override. Plato found in Egyptian philosophy and the State a model to carry out his reactionary aims. This continuity in philosophical doctrines refutes the basic assumption of Ani that

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there is a fundamental metaphysical exclusivism between the European and African cultural matrix.

On the other hand, there were differences in the context in which Plato did philosophy and the African experience which influenced his thought. The latter group's, James, Odele, and Diop, blunder was in not demarcating the concrete context. The salient continuity of philosophical doctrines obscured, for them, the *differentia specifica* of context in which philosophical discourse took place. Ani recognizes that there are differences, but she locates this difference in both context and philosophical doctrine by virtue of her metaphysical exclusion of Europe from Africa. What both Ani and her forerunners share in common is the failure to take into account the dialectical interplay of context and doctrine. Consequently, the *locus* of Platonism in the history of philosophy objectively remains undisclosed for them.

There is an additional point which entails an ontological problematic, *viz.*, the categorical relationship of particularity to universality. While it can be argued that the categories (universality and particularity) should not be conflated, conversely, they ought not be separated, for particularity and universality are correlative categories. By correlative categories I mean that each depends upon the other to exist. Particularity is not then a solitary category as assumed by the Afrocentrist.

### **The Epistemological Problematic: Subject/Object Dialectic**

Ani's claims that Plato, by virtue of differentiating between subject (knower) and object (the known) and arguing for the objectification of knowledge, formulates a "new epistemology" where objects replace symbols. She asserts, "[i]n the previous and disparate world-views, we see a knowing subject intimately involved in the surrounding universe. The acquisition of knowledge involving an immersion in this universe until, through sympathetic participation, meaning is revealed, expressed and understood via complex and multidimensional symbols."<sup>17</sup>

While it is true Plato's aim is the objectification of knowledge, it is not the case that this in and of itself constitutes a new epistemology. Ani, following Eric Havelock, establishes her notion of a new epistemology by contrasting Plato's philosophy to the Homeric poetic era. The contrast of Platonic philosophy to Homeric poetics is, in fact, a contrast between distinct kinds of intellectual discourse, *i.e.*, between philosophy and mythology rather than disparate philosophical schools. The mythological use of symbols is consistent with the artistic form (poetry) of expression. Poetry seeks not the cognition of reality, but better yet, it is an avenue for the affective expression (an emotional response and release) of and to reality. Affective expression is laden with symbols, *e.g.*, metaphor, simile, analogy, and synaesthesia; however, philosophy and par-

ticularly Platonism is not void of symbolism. Indeed, Ani makes reference herself to Plato's use of allegory, in the allegory of the cave.<sup>18</sup>

The grounds for charge of reification rest in the problem of the objectification of knowledge. Earlier I said the objectification of knowledge did not constitute a new epistemology by Plato. The break by philosophy from mythology, a break which precedes Plato required the objectification of knowledge. Rather than the mythological notion of the identity of subject and object which is an identity of immediacy, philosophy renders any identity of subject and object as a mediation. Western thought has numerous examples of the identity of subject and object, from Berkley to Hegel, yet for all objective idealists it is a process of mediation.

The mediation of subject and object is a logical necessity for any and all cognitive, as opposed to affective, undertaking. Even Ani follows this logical necessity when she argues that we must move from "deceptive heterogeneity" to "monolithic essence." Here she is calling for a cognitive process whereby appearance (heterogeneity) and essence are not only not an immediate identity, but that our perceptions of the immediate appearance are different from the objective reality of monolithic essence. If the subject's immediate apprehension of essence can be false, then it follows essence stands apart, objectively separate, from the knower as subject.

The movement from appearance to essence is an implicit recognition that the identity of subject and object is not immediate, thus in some sense separate. If to perceive is not to grasp essence, the subject must be a different category than the object, i.e., we must assume the objectification of knowledge.

Both Plato and pre-Socratic philosophers are on a different epistemological plane than mythology. Ionian materialism, for example, is quite different than Platonic idealism. Thus, pre-Platonic thought cannot be reduced, as Ani does, to Homeric poetics. In the history of Western philosophy, the debate between rationalism and empiricism signals a deep epistemological divide about the role of the senses. The subordination of sensation to reason is not a singular feature of European thought as Ani claims. Hence, Plato's rationalism is not a singular European philosophical tradition.

Both James and Olela show that the objectification of knowledge and the privileging of reason over sensation is something Plato adopted as a result of his training in Egypt. Plato's view of philosophy as a science of knowledge ("episteme") is not original to him or the Greeks.<sup>19</sup> Hence Ani's assertion,

"Plato's reason is the denial of spirit. Reason functions to control the more 'base appetites' and 'instincts.' The European view of the human begins to take shape here."<sup>20</sup>



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is a distortion of the history of philosophy and the notion of rationality held by the Egyptians.

Eurocentrism is a false universality; however, it is a non-sequitur to claim, as Ani does, that universality (in and of itself) is false. The epistemological and ontological points are corresponding philosophical issues. Ani's denial, on the epistemological plane, of objectivity (the objectification of knowledge) is correlative to the negation of the ontological category universality. And inversely, all claims that substantiate a realist epistemology, i.e., the objectification of knowledge, in turn give support to ontological claims of universality. Thus, the quest for particularity (by the Afrocentrist) not only entails the negation of universality, but also the negation of objectivity.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Asante, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Asante, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Asante, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Asante, 1987, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Asante, 1987, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Asante, 1987, 180.

<sup>9</sup> Asante, 1987, 181.

<sup>10</sup> Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Ani, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ani, 29-30. Cheikh Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 27-32. Henry Olela, *From Ancient Africa to Ancient Greece: An Introduction to the History of Philosophy* (Atlanta: The Select Publishing Corp., 1981), 191-219. George G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954).

Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots to Classical Civilization Vol. 1* (New Brunswick: Tuges University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Ani, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ani, *Yurugu*, 573. James, *Stolen*, 98, 101-02. Theophile Obenga, "African Philosophy of the Pharaonic Period," in Ivan Van Sertima, *Egypt Revisited* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 292.

<sup>15</sup> James, 42. Olela, 115-23.

<sup>16</sup> Ani, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ani, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Ani, 36-44.

<sup>19</sup> James, 83-111. Olela, 191-201.

<sup>20</sup> Ani, 32.