

# The Cultural Identity of Africa and the Global Tasks of Africana Studies

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## ABSTRACT

**This essay is concerned with the cultural identity of Africa and the appropriate study of Africa(ns). It is a direct response to the notion of conceptually and pragmatically situating Africa, in all its scope and dimensions, back into Africana Studies. The paper raises a fundamental question: whether the vocation of ‘African Studies’ is really about the study of Africa(ns) and proposes that Africana studies is better suited to project a consummate cultural identity and approach to the study of Africa(ns). Toward that end, the paper distinguishes ‘African studies’ from ‘Africana studies’ which is perhaps the first step in confronting the challenges faced by both enterprises, as well as how the latter can become an appropriate intellectual enterprise that would substantively contribute to African life and practice.**

## INTRODUCTION

Ancient cultures are being transformed through globalized social reengineering into an electronic, legal, linguistic and moral parking lot that blankets the earth in an undifferentiated paved uniformity. Both the lot and access to it are Indo-European (including clones and associates) owned and managed. Upon the certification of their postmodern Euro-American cultural reorientation, formerly distinct nationalities, states, clans, [ethnicities] are provided with bar-coded entrance keys and assigned parking spaces (fixed economic roles/status) to facilitate the rapid production, transfer and consumption of goods and services. Ownership and control of the means of production, rulemaking agencies, financial centers and the global telecommunications that facilitate the transactions are securely in the hands of the American, European, and Japanese business elite... This is the current face of an old monster that feverishly reinvents itself. This is a wolf pack that changes clothes between slaughters. This is the rapacious and insatiable Indo-European expansionism.<sup>1</sup>

The ‘parking lot’ analogy is both purposeful and instructive. For our purpose, the analogy contextualizes the discussion that follows, elucidating some of the current global and local truisms of the condition of African people. This essay is concerned with the cultural identity of Africa and the ways in which the study of Africa(ns) is approached. It is also a direct response to a statement by Oyekan Owomoyeka: “...perhaps the surest way of getting Africa back into African Studies is to get African Studies back to Africa... But, even if we cannot return African Studies to Africa in geographical terms, we could do so at least epistemologically and paradigmatically.”<sup>2</sup> Owomoyeka’s statement is principally a conceptual claim premised on the anchoring and ownership of the study of Africa(ns) by Africans. It

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raises the fundamental question of whether the vocation of ‘African Studies’ is really about what it purports to be. Does African Studies contribute to African life and practice in substantive ways?

If the study of Africa has been and continues to be driven by paradigms and theories established by non-African scholars, then African studies is an invention of academia, which ultimately serves its own interests and those of non-Africans. Here, I am merely stating the obvious. The problem that Owomoyeka poses is significant not so much for the field of African studies, but for the study of Africa(ns). By the study of Africa(ns), I mean an African centered approach that conceptualizes reality and situates Africans within their cosmological, symbolic, and pragmatic universe. Such an unambiguous approach not only affirms African agency and serves their best interests, but also authenticates the notion of an African cultural-historical continuum that predates African studies and would continue even if the academic field ceased to exist. The discussion that follows seeks to address why the situation Owomoyeka describes came into being and how it is possible for the study of Africa(ns) to conceptually and pragmatically become anchored in the reality of Africa, in all its scope and comprehensible dimensions.

### **ANCHORING AND OWNERSHIP IN THE STUDY OF AFRICA(NS)**

The situation that Owomoyeka describes has its origins in the inception and development of African studies in the academy. Given the academic character of African studies in the U.S. and its geographical and cultural construction outside of Africa, it is evident that the ‘founding’ of the field lies ostensibly in anthropology and through agents of the European colonial enterprise. Essentially, the colonial enterprise’s “physical occupation and its maintenance (pacification, exploitation [of Africa]) made research possible, research freed of the constraints of maintaining order and *its own security*.”<sup>3</sup> The unrestricted access to research ‘objects’ bolstered the efforts of anthropology, which in turn, provided the knowledge base for much of the other academic disciplines, including colonial planners, whose policies of (in)direct governance mandated ‘ethnographic’ data for establishing and perpetuating an effective hegemony (even without their physical presence). The academic study of Africa emerged out of this political and cultural context. I say the ‘academic study of Africa,’ that is, African studies, to distinguish the efforts of non-Africans studying Africa from Africans studying themselves and the world they existed in. The latter, of course, originates in the organic processes of African culture development.

Despite efforts by notable scholars such as Leo Hansberry, who designed the first African studies course at Howard University in the 1920s, the development of African studies has been dominated outside of the African world and largely through non-Africans. In American institutions, primarily historically white institutions, between 1953 and 1961 ten African studies programs and/or departments were established. By 1970, there were approximately seventy-eight African studies programs and/or departments in the United States. Furthermore, the non-African controlled Ford Foundation has been and continues to be a prime financier of African studies. Conceptual evidence for African studies being an invention by and created to serve the interests of non-Africans can be found in the parameters of African studies. African studies focused on the geographical entity of Africa rather than the movement and development of its people, thus suggesting that Africans who were forcibly brought to the United States and elsewhere stopped being Africans. The claim is a cultural and political stance which rejects the reality of African cultural-historical continuity, and conforms to a worldview and theoretical construct that also holds the principal unit of analysis to be the ‘tribe.’<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it becomes clear not only that the “institutions of European society [have provided]... the categories of western (or European) social science,” but also the unstated thrust in African Studies that non-European culture(s) either conform or exist in opposition to this authoritative model of social organization and knowledge production.<sup>5</sup> The implication is that “African cultures are held as the primary obstacles to [their own] development.”<sup>6</sup>

The development and expansion of the African and its cultural and societal order is intimately linked to the notion of Africana studies, rather than African studies. African studies and its development is akin to African “political independence and development [which]... have been illusionary.”<sup>7</sup> Africana studies, in contrast, is an insurgent movement originating in the 1960s that ‘shifted the center,’ brought about new ways of knowing and constructing knowledge, and challenged the established socio-political order. Africana studies critiqued the established order within the academy. This insurgent posture emphasized an alternative perspective related to liberation that eventually led to a rupture within the African Studies Association and the creation of the African Heritage Studies Association in the late 1960s.

In addition to the posture and foci of Africana studies, its motto of ‘commitment, connectedness, and consciousness’ expresses the necessity of having substantive links with communities of the African world outside academia and its mainstream discourse or knowledge project, and Western racialized and genderized epistemology. The reason historically white institutions can point to diversity in their schools is due to the insurgence of people of the African world in the 1960s. The large majority of students and instructors of the African world, in these institutions, owe their presence to the Black (Africana) studies movement of that same period. This movement has raised the most challenges about the production of knowledge and affirmed the notion of African cultural-historical continuity by way of its focus on the African world—that is, Africa, the Americas, Europe and elsewhere. African studies becomes a moot point for any African who is located within his/her conceptual universe and is culturally oriented to proclaim and express the pragmatism and philosophy of this universe without ambiguity. This is not to indict any African who feels that he or she exemplifies these decisive factors, but if a scholar, African or non-African, works for a non-African or African institution and is not primarily engaged in the study of Africa(ns), as described in this essay, he or she is merely an agent of non-African interests. There is no fence or gray area to sit on.

The study of Africa(ns) and African cultural continuity is best represented by what African-centered scholars in North America characterize as ‘Africana studies.’ It should be made clear that “Africana studies is not a recent development.”<sup>8</sup> Africana studies is a knowledge enterprise that explores, records, interprets and builds upon experiences of a global African community. As a tradition of intellectual inquiry and study, it contributes to the development of theoretical constructs and research methods for and through the aforementioned tasks. Africana studies transcends the disciplinary boundaries held by academia and seeks a holistic mode that represents the comprehensible dimensions of the temporal-spiritual continuum of life itself. In this continuum, the expression of truth is culture bound, since all human endeavors occur in the context of culture, and is neither esoteric nor mystical, but rather a communal entity. Africana studies properly situates the seemingly elusive concept of culture by recognizing African cultural continuity in the study of Africa(ns). Culture is a composite of the ideational, spiritual, and material realities, and if African scholars do not thoroughly engage these realities, they are neither dealing with African culture(s) or reality itself. In this context, the design of Africana studies as a teaching and research enterprise that is located within the academy suffers from challenges similar to African studies. The quandary for both African studies and Africana studies is that they cannot or have not effectively addressed the issues of culture and therefore confront African reality in its most comprehensible totality. African and Africana studies are not independent of white-controlled institutions or financing and historically Black colleges in the United States and universities on the African continent, which have African or Africana studies programs, also suffer from this dilemma.<sup>9</sup>

The debate whether African or Africana studies is a field or discipline highlights the ideational dilemma, which is apparent by the conceptual dependency and use of non-African paradigms and theories. It is said that a discipline is marked by a) clearly established intellectual parameters with apparent theoretical configuration; and b) ideational and analytical ‘meanings’

that must be delineated (i.e., what specifically characterizes what ‘we’ do as different in the social construction of knowledge). By these standards, both African and Africana studies lack a consummate theory of the study of Africa(ns). Indeed, the source of what these enterprises need (but lack) can be found in “[t]he conceptions of culture, history, and spirituality [that] have not always been presented in a coherent fashion.”<sup>10</sup> African and Africana studies are also deficient in engaging questions of spiritual existence, the parent of the ideational and material dimensions of reality. The deficiency is due to (a) the location of both enterprises of inquiry in the academy (whether in Africa or elsewhere) and (b) ‘intellectuals’ who perceive reality primarily through rationalism and are thus impotent in their spiritual receptivity.<sup>11</sup>

### **TOWARD THE STUDY OF AFRICA(NS)**

It is unmistakable that Oyekan Owomoyeka’s statement speaks not to the question of possibility, but the necessity of the study of Africa(ns) being located conceptually, symbolically, and culturally in Africa. In this context, Africa should be viewed as a geographic, cultural, conceptual, socio-political, and spiritual entity. In fact, a concept of culture that would suffice is one in which Africa is the expression of culture, that is, the physical (land and people), ideational (philosophy and thought), and spiritual (temporal manifestation). In essence, Africa and its indigenous peoples are living entities bound in symbiotic relationships. And by extension, the African who is situated within his/her conceptual universe and is culturally orientated to proclaim and express the pragmatism and philosophy of this universe without ambiguity is Africa!

The implication for African and Africana studies then is to either move in the concerted and necessary direction, as described below, or suffer the eminent fate of outmoded ideologies. Though both African and Africana studies face similar challenges, it is my contention that Africana studies—due to its scope and design, and it being the product of an insurgent movement which sought to establish an African-centered intellectual enterprise in higher education—is more suitable to accomplish the global tasks of the study of Africa(ns). Yet, for Africana studies to move forward as the authentic study of Africa(ns) it must address the following issues forthrightly and unambiguously:

Firstly, Africana studies must define itself as the study, learning, and living of Africa(ns) and then view itself as a discourse. When Africana studies becomes a discourse “it [must be] systematic and rule governed via its alignment with a particular episteme and paradigm. It [must be] ‘honest’ in that it is an accurate representation of the ‘truth’ as defined and experienced by the people who are ‘subject’ and have ‘agency’ with the lived experience of that truth.”<sup>12</sup> The African episteme must answer the epistemological concerns of (a) what is the nature of reality, (b) how truth is defined, (c) what is the relationship between the knower and the known, (d) what can be known, and (e) what should/could be done in response to the known.<sup>13</sup>

If epistemology is preoccupied with the nature of knowledge and science is the means by which we validate what we know, then it would follow that all methods of inquiry are scientific methods (i.e., they confirm what we know). Yet, science must be understood as a cultural science that is anchored in the Africans’ understanding of the dynamism of their culture and their ideas about the organization of reality. Otherwise, what is the use (for the African) of critical examination and empirical verification if these processes are not consistent with the African conceptual universe and cultural orientation? Thus, theoretical definitions and characteristic explanations and description of its methodology must be addressed within the collective ‘circle’ of those Africans who are committed to the endeavor of Africana studies.<sup>14</sup> Once this need is satisfied, Africans can actually begin to concretely, through communication and consensus, address the historiography of the African experience beyond the currency of mainstream

historical knowledge and criticisms of ‘revisionist history.’<sup>15</sup> The fact is all history is revisionist. This, in part, explains why the task of addressing the historiography of the African experience is a serious one, perhaps, the most dynamic task of them all.

Secondly, Africana studies must resolve the central question of ‘to be African or not.’ That is, Africans ‘must realize their indisputable connection to their African origin and that which brought [them] into existence.’<sup>16</sup> The question of being African or not is one of authenticity or mimicry. Let me illustrate: “A mole will perceive the world in terms of tunnels and tunneling. Similarly, an ant or bee will understand reality as an expression of the collective... The imposition of the mole’s conception of reality on the bee can only result in a confused and self-destructive bee.”<sup>17</sup> In this illustration, the African is analogous to the ‘bee’ and the non-African is to the ‘mole.’

The African must be like the sun, which contributes greatly to human life, but does not proselytize; in all humility, it shines brilliantly each day and simply does what a sun does. The sun (as we know it) does not attempt to be the moon or another star, because that is not its nature. An African proverb summarizes my point best: ‘A piece of wood may stay in water for ten years, but it will never become a crocodile.’

Thirdly, Africana studies must exercise caution with comparative methodologies or postures that are polemical in nature (e.g., African discourses that are preoccupied or even consumed by non-African concerns). Comparative hypotheses and methodologies represent inferences based on incomplete evidence characteristic of European thought and behavior as the referenced universe. Conceptual dependency or incarceration would have one believe that comparing African reality to that of non-Africans, as the referenced universe, is sensible. European epistemology is fundamentally concerned with the creation or invention of the ‘object’ (e.g., the thing, the other). When Africans assume the posture of comparative methodologies or polemical preoccupation, the totality of what is European or non-African becomes the reference and Africans therefore create ‘masters’ out of a function of fear, a fear that is ostensibly transferred through European epistemology and cultural hegemony. The appropriate posture is that the collective wisdom and sensibilities of African people must be asserted and affirmed through collective intelligence and not through the individual intellect. It is a process, not a step-by-step procedure, of cultural rediscovery and reclamation, and by extension, personal transformation. Again, all answers can and will be found in the ‘circle’ (collective).

Lastly, Africana studies must acknowledge and move beyond the fact that the African’s psychic and institutional spaces are contested and congested areas. They are contested in the sense that many Africans do not control and independently operate institutions, and produce thinking outside non-African spheres of influence and hegemony. The African’s psychic and institutional spaces are congested mentally as a result of cultural confusion and ambiguity, and institutionally as a result of replicating European schooling and, upholding the primacy of Western culture more than Westerners themselves. It is only within this psychic and institutional arrangement, for instance, that one can be an ‘expert’ in African or Africana studies and not know an African language. This is unheard of in any field of study, teaching, and learning. In addition, the issue of psychic and institutional space that Africans identify as theirs is closely related to the direction of Africana studies outside the academy (i.e., independent of non-African funding, theories and paradigms, learning structures). It is clear, at numerous levels, that Africans worldwide are dependent upon the non-African socio-political and economic order.

The key question is to what extent is proximity (to that order) an indication of compromise, at best, or surrender at worst? History informs us that the closer Africans get to ‘things’ non-African, whether they be liquor, money, or gadgets (technology), the more these Africans became dependent, mystified, and lose their sense of cultural being (including their cultural and materials resources). The point here is not that liquor, money or gadgets are exclusively of non-African origin but rather, these entities cannot be divorced from the cultural context from which they are derived. Africana studies must therefore be an

intergenerational transmission process and an institution of cultural knowledge to ensure continuity. It should develop leadership competence in community and culture. Such a process and institution may have associations with non-African learning structures, but should be relatively self-sufficient and located in physical and psychic spaces that Africans identify and defend as theirs. To develop leadership competence in community and culture is a centrifugal movement which would demystify foreign ideologies embodied in 'things' non-African and a simultaneous shift centripetally to an African reality in terms of living, learning, and studying.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of its challenges, Africana studies is better equipped and well-suited to address the study of Africa(ns) in a substantive way as well as contribute to African life and practice. My position is certainly not the same as Gavin Kitching as expressed in his piece, "Why I gave up African studies", but his sentiments do underscore if not confirm some of my observations and conclusions about African studies (*African Studies Review & Newsletter*, vol. XXII, 1 (June 2000), pp. 21-26). Essentially, Kitching found African studies depressing as a result of his optimism and hope (in and about Africa) being replaced by pessimism and cynicism. This was compounded by dichotomist factions that either favored 'internalist' or 'externalist' explanations within African studies for Africa's problems. Kitching concluded that until the legacy of imperialism is 'killed,' 'neither Africa nor African studies will be able to make real progress.' His conclusions, though, seem to put faith (albeit misguided) in the 'state' and 'elites.' Kitching argues, "The prime responsibility for making a decent future for Africa's people lies... on the shoulders of the continent's own governing elites." This, however, has not worked, particularly, from the perspective of the majority of the people in African societies. African 'states' are both artificial and truncated entities that have no real meaning in people's lives ( though their lives are, unfortunately, affected by their policies, decisions and instruments that protect the vested interests of those 'elites,' or often the American, European, and Japanese business elites that operate through the clones and associates we call 'African elites.')

The fact of the matter is that we cannot and should not be so inclined to start from the 'problems of Africa(ns)' but rather from what has worked in the best interests of Africa(ns) and what will contribute to the genuine self-sufficiency, ideational clarity, and physiological health of Africa(ns). In the realm of research, study, and teaching, the notion of Africana studies can substantively contribute to that reality as it addresses those challenges expressed in this essay. The Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University and the African World Studies Institute at Fort Valley State University, for example, offer a combined starting point or model to emulate. The faculty, students and curricula foci are grounded in the realities of the African world. Most faculty and students are not just serious 'academics' but also activists that plan and participate in activities that affect the lives of Africans. It is one thing to talk, attend conferences, and debate at conferences, but the key question, in my mind, is what are African scholars building? Africana studies is in a position to develop scholars who are engaged in research, teaching, and studying African reality as well as contributing, in real ways, to the African life and practice.

The last 30 years in Africana studies has not been so much about building—institutions, families, villages, and African personhood—in the African world but more so to clarify exactly what Africana studies is and should be about. Until recently, most, if not all, African scholars were trained in non-African traditions of inquiry or disciplines and then 'came over' to African or Africana studies. Today, however, we have older and young scholars, such as myself, who have had ten or more concentrated years of training in Africana studies and are now in a position to build from a consummate foundation and with a clearer vision. That vision is expressed in this essay. A people without a sense of history are visionless and so, with vision, those who are committed to the enterprise of Africana studies have to do the work

that is necessary and not be distracted by illusionary debates or events that do not contribute to African life and practice in any real way.

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## NOTES

1. Akoto and Akoto, pp. 5-6.
2. Owomoyela, pp. 96-97.
3. Copans, p. 21.
4. Onoge, p. 35.
5. MacGaffey, p. 42.
6. Onoge, p. 39.
7. Onoge, p. 40.
8. According to James Turner, *Africana studies*' "... recent emergence as an academic field is much more related to the endeavors of Black intellectuals during the past [seventy] years... but it was during [the 1930s] that the idea of Black Studies as a separate academic field began to emerge" (pp. xv – xvi).
9. July, p. 182.
10. Akoto, p. vi.
11. Spiritual receptivity should not be confused with religious orientation or convictions. The nature of African spirituality requires a much lengthier discussion, which will not be provided here.
12. Nobles, p. 187.
13. Nobles, p. 189.
14. Turner, p. xvii. Here, I am using the word 'circle' purposely to invoke the African philosophical assumption that all answers can and will be found in the circle made by those who create and complete it.
15. Neale, p. 112.
16. Nobles, p. 192.
17. Akoto and Akoto, p. 31.

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