Afrecentricity: Implications for South Africa?

Dr Roger Gocking, of the Department of History and Government, Mercy College, New York, considers an issue that is of great importance for a changing South Africa.

At the first Pan-Africanist Congress held in London in 1900, the African-American scholar and activist, Dr W.E.B. Du Bois prophesied that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the colour line. The century has not let him down. Explosive racial issues have continually demanded attention, and have served to keep the “colour line”, at the centre of world attention. In the United States of America the existence of the “colour line” has been at the centre of what the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, described as “the American dilemma”. It has been even more so the case in Southern Africa, and as the struggle to fashion a “New South Africa” intensifies in the coming years, undoubtedly the “colour line” dilemmas of the apartheid past will metamorphose into new forms and shapes that will be this unique form of racism’s major legacy to future generations both white and black.

Clearly the elimination of de jure discrimination, or what Du Bois also prophesied in 1900 would be “advancing integration”, does not prevent this. In the 1950s and 1960s when the Civil Rights movement in the United States gained momentum, integration was very much the strategy for removing the “colour line”. Dr Martin Luther King most eloquently expressed this in his 1963 “I have a dream” speech in which he held out the hope “that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners [would] be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood”. Today, however, almost 30 years after King dreamed of racial harmony in his homeland, the “table of brotherhood” seems more one of rancorous discord where the interest has shifted to asserting one’s own identity, own culture and a separate destiny. The recent upsurge in Afrocentric thought best of all represents this since to both its advocates and to its critics it is a complete “philosophical outlook determined by history”, and like a “religion or an ideology”, emphasizes what separates the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners rather than what brings them together. The antagonisms are real enough for a recent article in the New York Times to ask whether: “Afrocentrism [is]…introducing its own prejudices?”

For radical advocates of Afrocentricity, like Dr Leonard Jeffries, former Chairperson of the African-American Studies Department at the City College of New York, there is little interest in sitting down at the table of brotherhood with those he disparagingly describes as the “ice people – the greedy, warlike inhabitants of the North [and their descendants]”. Instead, the “sun people” – the generous, communal peoples of Africa and the diaspora – he sees as not merely culturally different, but also as genetically distinct owning to the presence of the skin pigment, melanin. In a lecture in July 1991 at the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival in Albany, he emphasized just how antagonistic he felt that the relations between these two groups were by maintaining that there was “a conspiracy, planned and plotted and programmed out of Hollywood” by “people called Greenberg and Weissberg and Trigliani… who with their financial partners, the Mafia, [have] put together a financial system of destruction of black people”.

Not all Afrocentrists stress race or veer in an anti-semitic direction. Dr Molefi Asante, Chairperson of the Department of African-American Studies at Temple University, widely recognized as the leading proponent of the Afrocentric perspective, emphasizes what he describes as the continuing unfolding of a specific African system. According to Asante, this is derived from a common historical experience that links the people of Africa with those in the diaspora, and as a result Afrocentricity is fundamentally Pan-African in its inspiration. He sees the different components of this Pan-African world engaged in a “humanizing function” that will contribute to the replacement of the “insular individualism”, the “aggressive materialism”, and dehumanizing emphasis on efficiency that all Afrocentrists consider are the hallmarks of white, Eurocentric society. To Asante this vision is “only superficially related to colour, it is more accurately a philosophical outlook determined by history”.
As the chairman of the only post-graduate African studies programme that describes itself as Afrocentric, it is not surprising that Professor Asante sees his main task as producing scholars who will “expand the [present] dialogue [in the United States] to include African-American information”.

What, if any, is the relevance of this determination on the part of African-Americans “to place Africa and its culture, its images, symbols, beliefs as the central source of their inspiration and as what determines their lives” to the Southern Africa and especially the “New South Africa” that is arising out of the ashes of apartheid? Africans on the continent obviously do not have to contend with minority status, which is the reality for their brothers and sisters in the United States of America. In spite of colonial rule and decades of white settler domination, both institutionally and symbolically, African culture is clearly still vibrant and alive. Undoubtedly this has been the unstated assumption of both university and public audiences in Lesotho before whom I have spoken about the Afrocentric movement in the United States. To these basically middle-class members of African society, the integrationist strategies of the 1960s still seem much more realistic for African-Americans than impractical attempts to put Africa at the centre. Others, in seeking parallels, have wondered whether the current concern with Afropcentricity in the United States is not akin to the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s in South Africa. The implication being that Africans have already passed through this culturally oriented phase of political awareness.

There is some validity in these observations. The situation in South Africa today promises a much more fundamental hand-over of power to the black majority than any possible increase in African-American political representation in the United States of America. At the same time, however, the Codesa process, with its emphasis on political and economic matters, has obscured the cultural dimension that must be a part of this process. Class domination, as the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, observes, results as much from the consensus of the dominated as from their physical repression, and “so-called private organizations like the Church, trade unions, or schools” allow “one social group” to exercise “hegemony...over the entire nation”. Where class and race joined hands to achieve the economic and political subjugation of a majority, as was the case in South Africa, it was inevitable that cultural domination would be an even more inescapable component in a system where one social group’s hegemony was over a nation made up of a kaleidoscope of different nationalities and ethnic groups.

The African-American academic, Harold Cruse, writing in the late 1960s, recognized how much this was so in the United States of America when he argued that the “crisis” his fellow black intellectuals faced was going to be primarily one of cultural identity. “Free your mind and your arse will follow” was how a younger generation of activists more bluntly expressed this challenge. At this time, however, “freeing your mind” still played second fiddle to the more immediate aims of the then developing Black Power movement. Black Power, as its most articulate spokesman, Stokely Carmichael, described it, was primarily about blacks taking economic and political control of their own communities. The most pressing challenge was for blacks to create their own independent political organizations, and indeed this was the thrust that the movement followed with considerable success so that today there are over 300 African-American city mayors, 39 congressmen, one senator, one governor and literally thousands of elected officials at the state level.

At the same time African-Americans also began to win acceptance into other institutions in American society, most noticeably the elite universities which upuntil that time had been predominantly white. The Eurocentric focus of these institutions invariably alienated these newcomers and stimulated them to assert their own cultural identity. As these communities increased in size, they soon reached a critical mass which gave them the confidence to demand that the university become officially part of this process. To combat their sense of alienation and facilitate their search for identity, black students demanded special housing, courses relevant to the African-American experience, black faculty and administrators and more black enrolment that contributed to strengthening their position as a militant interest group on campus. It was more, however, than just demands for special facilities and academic programmes. As these communities gained greater confidence in demanding changes in the way in which the university dealt with its black students, they began to challenge assumptions whites held about their culture in ways that could even provoke hostile white reactions. The recent struggles over the “non”, or what should be the essential components of the introductory courses that freshmen in American universities take, is the most significant indication of this trend.

In a similar fashion the previously all-white universities of South Africa have begun to open up to blacks, and already in some of them enrolment has begun to reach a critical mass. It requires no great perceptive ness to recognize that these environments must be at least uncomfortable and in many instances openly hostile to people who come from very different backgrounds. Even more so than their American counterparts, South African institutions are dominated by Eurocentric perspectives. A recent meeting of the albeit conservative Historic Association of South Africa at the University of the Orange Free State in Bloemfontein in January 1992, was a vivid indication of just how much this was so. To even fairly “progressive” educators from Natal the source of inspiration for new ideas about teaching history in these changing times is still Holland and the United Kingdom. It is hard to imagine that this will be the case for South African blacks who also want to see changes. Instead, it is much more likely that they will want to investigate what people who have gone through similar experiences to themselves are doing.

Contributing to their interest in looking for new ideas is the need to fill the intellectual and political vacuum that the collapse of apartheid has created. As a participant at the New Nation writers’ conference held in Johannesburg in
December 1991 half humorously expressed it: “With apartheid gone what will there be to write about?” The concomitant collapse of the socialist world has clearly compounded this feeling of “adriftness”, since anti-apartheid opposition was also very much anti-capitalist and pro-socialist. Here, once again, there are parallels to the United States of America. In the 1960s and 1970s the Vietnam war and criticisms of American imperialism contributed to increasing interest in socialist ideas and inspired organizations like the Black Panthers, the Republic of New Africa and numbers of African-American labour movements. However, these early Marxist-inspired groups have now been replaced by more culturally oriented organizations, such as the Association for the Study of Classical African Societies (ASCAC) and Tu-Wa-Moja (Swahili for “We are one”). The confrontation with the “system” is clearly far more ambiguous than it was in the heyday of the Civil Rights movement. For example, big city police forces, the recent Los Angeles riots notwithstanding, have become much more integrated in their composition than at the time of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale’s confrontations with the Oakland Police in California in the 1960s and 1970s.

Perhaps, however, the most subtle reason for this shift to a preoccupation with culture and history is the changing composition of the African-American population. Afrocentricity is very much a middle class phenomenon. As a recent article in Newsweek pointed out, “its adherents are mostly middle class and well educated, but they feel themselves alienated from white American society nonetheless. For them the problem is not class. It is white racism”. It is no longer the crude exclusion of the Jim Crow era, but a far more subtle attitude that is based on the assumption that there is only one valid cultural orientation in the United States of America, without which successful incorporation into the great American middle class is impossible. As the same article in Newsweek points out, “since the passage of the civil-rights acts of the nineteen sixties, the white establishment has tended to redefine the race problem as one of class. This has lead to the comforting conclusion that the problem would largely be solved if middle-class values could somehow be imparted to the black ‘underclass’”.

The manifestations of Afrocentricity are designed to challenge this assumption, but at the same time demonstrate its class background, and indicate where the points of friction between middle class blacks and their white counterparts lie. For example, the discarding of European names has become one way of rejecting the centrality of the Judeo-Christian tradition since most such names are Biblical in origin. Neither do they want Moslem names. To Afrocentrists Muhammad Ali’s well publicized switch in the 1970s from his “slave name”, Cassius Clay was compromised by his exchanging a Eurocentric name for an Arab one, and a religion that is as contradictory “to the Diasporan Afrocentricity as Christianity has been”. Instead, to the contemporary Afrocentrist the search must be for names that as accurately as possible reflect the ancestral origins of African-Americans. It is an important step that African-Americans have to take if they are to achieve “a new perspective on [their] place in the world”. Significantly the movement’s most eloquent spokesman, Dr Molefi Asante, has adopted a name that combines both a Southern African (Molefi), and a West African (Asante) component.

Though of important symbolic significance, there are clearly more important aspects to “placing Africa at the centre” than adopting African names, wearing dashikis or plaiting your hair in corn rows. Higher on the scale of Afrocentric concerns is the issue of language. On one level this pertains to an ever-increasing collection of words that Afrocentrists attack as contributing to maintaining a Eurocentric and racist perspective. Some words, such as “ghetto”, “minority” and “disadvantaged” are attacked relentlessly since they represent an attempt on the part of white society to disguise the continuing “institutional” and “process” racism that they see as being part and parcel of the United States of America today. Other words that describe aspects of African society in what is seen as a pejorative fashion, such as “tribe”, “pygmy”, “witch doctor”, “bushman”, “jungle” and “native” are also attacked. And as knowledge about Africa, its peoples and their culture expands, so does the determination of the Afrocentrists to get away from what is seen as terminology that reflects the Eurocentric conception of a fundamentally “primitive”, “sub-Saharan” Africa.

Instead, as Asante puts it, African Americans need “a revolutionary language” which “must not befuddle” and must not be “allowed to confuse”. “Critics”, he maintains, “must actively pursue the clarification of public language when they believe it is designed to whiten the issues.” Just as contemporary Afrocentrists reject the suitability of Islam for African Americans, so too do they reject the revolutionary exclusiveness of Marxist analysis and its language. It is possible “for socialism to find expression in places outside of its original intellectual context, but no context” Asante argues, “is ever the same”. He does not deny that “socialism provides us with some possibilities of freedom from class exploitation but our political liberation must come primarily from notions forged from our own social experience”.

What he sees as necessary is the development of new terminologies to express this reality. On one hand it means redefining words such as “classical”, which Eurocentrists have appropriated to describe what they consider the highest expression of their musical tradition, and “universal” which they use to describe that “classic” works of their literary tradition. “The polyrhythms and syncopated eights of Ellington, Coltrane, Eubie Blake, Charlie Parker, Mingus and Gillespie”, have just as much right to be described as “classical” Asante argues. Similarly, Afrocentric literature that does not deal with white images, but treats issues (like racism and colonialism) has as much right to be considered “universal”. Indeed, the argument is made that such themes actually touch upon the lives of more people in this world than the concerns of white writers operating from an introverted, Eurocentric framework.

New ideas that fall outside of the Eurocentric perspective require entirely new terminology. The term “Ebonics” to
describe what used to be referred to in Eurocentric fashion as “black English” is one such example. “Afrocentrism”, the study of African peoples from an Afrocentric perspective, is another example. In addition to this, the Afrocentrists have incorporated a substantial African vocabulary from primarily Kiswahili into their discourse. Njia, for example, a Kiswahili word that means “the way”, is the African term for Afrocentricity. Sacred places and important African and African-American leaders become reference points in the Afrocentric perspective and replace their counterparts in both the European and Islamic world view. Finally, Assane has also devised a new calendar to replace the Christian calendar, which has Christ’s birth as its reference point. Instead, he talks about ABA and BBA, which refer to “After the Beginning Again” and “Before the Beginning Again”. In this Afrocentric system, the landing of the first African-Americans as indentured servants at Jamestown in 1619 becomes the demarcation point in African-American history.

The landing at Jamestown plays the important role in Afrocentric thought of demonstrating the longevity and essential role of African-Americans in American history. Even more important to Afrocentrists is the role of Egypt. Reflecting this, undoubtedly the most important figure in the Afrocentric pantheon of major thinkers has been the Senegalese, Cheikh Anta Diop. 17 His challenging work that seized upon by Afrocentrists as evidence of the historical centrality of Africa, and more controversial, has been his claim that West Africans arrived in the Americas before Columbus. 18

As one of the fundamental tenets of Afrocentricity, it has spawned considerable spin-offs. Martin Bernal’s two-volume work, Black Athenea, which seek to show how fundamental this “black” African civilization was in influencing the flowering of Hellenic civilization, is a direct example. More indirectly affected by this assertion of the centrality of Africa, and more controversial, has been Ivan Sertima’s claim that West Africans arrived in the “New World” before Columbus. 18

Obviously not all of this is applicable to Southern Africa or even South Africa. There is little need for “authentic” names since apartheid did not strip Africans of this part of their culture like slavery did in the United States of America. Nevertheless, it requires little imagination to see many parallels. African studies, though far better developed than in American universities in the 1960s, deals almost exclusively with South Africa. Some of it is quite radical, but the focus is primarily on the impact of white colonization on South African society — with little room for much else. Mostly this was a negative experience for blacks, rather like slavery in the United States of America, which significantly for the Afrocentrists in the United States plays a far more scaled down role in their scholarship than it does for more mainstream historians of the African-American past. Instead, the former have emphasized African achievements both in Africa and in the Americas. Now that South Africa has begun to establish contact with its African neighbours north of the Limpopo, African studies will no doubt parallel this development and expand to include not only an interest in African civilizations that are relatively near at hand, such as Great Zimbabwe, but also those of the Sudanic zone and undoubtedly the Nile Valley.

The issue of language, which to Afrocentrists in the United States of America is such an important issue, promises also to strike a powerful cord in the South African setting. It was one of the most emotionally sensitive issues that was discussed at the New Nation writers’ conference, but with an important twist. It was not just a question of white versus black. On both sides of this divide there are in turn major divisions in the South African context, and attempting to resolve this will clearly provoke a great deal of antagonism. Afrikaans-speaking whites have a serious chip on their shoulder vis-à-vis their English-speaking counterparts, and, ironically, through the language of “baaskap” often close links with blacks and particularly with “coloureds”. On the other hand, the multiplicity of languages on the African side makes it impossible to talk in terms of a South African counterpart to “Ebonics”. Nevertheless given the historical dominance of both Afrikaans and English, South African blacks will also have to actively pursue the clarification of public language when they believe it is designed to whiten issues. Clearly more than just changing place names will be involved as the struggle intensifies to make the “New South Africa” at least sound blacker.

Judging from the American experience, the struggle over Afrocentricity has been primarily in the realm of education where its main manifestation, the battle over a “multicultural” curriculum, stretches all the way from primary to tertiary institutions of learning. So far it has generated little political momentum. However, the 1988 Democratic presidential candidate, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, has pointedly started using the term African-American, which has annoyed a number of the old guard who are still struggling with the name shift from “negro” to “black”. How long this will remain the case is unclear. With the recently established festival of Kwanzaa capable of attracting over 30,000 celebrants over three days in New York City, it is hard to imagine that African-American politicians will not soon catch on that they too must “Afrocentrize” their image if they are to keep in step with their constituencies. Kwanzaa, which was established by Dr Maulana Karenga in 1966, is patterned after African harvest festivals, but pointedly is celebrated on the day of the new year — rather like slavery in the United States of America, which significantly for the Afrocentrists in the United States plays a far more scaled down role in their scholarship than it does for more mainstream historians of the African-American past. Instead, the former have emphasized African achievements both in Africa and in the Americas. Now that South Africa has begun to establish contact with its African neighbours north of the Limpopo, African studies will no doubt parallel this development and expand to include not only an interest in African civilizations that are relatively near at hand, such as Great Zimbabwe, but also those of the Sudanic zone and undoubtedly the Nile Valley.

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There is clearly even greater inspiration in South Africa for changing the public calendar. Apart from Christian holidays such as Christmas and Ascension, celebrations like Republic Day and the Day of the Vow still cast a shadow over contemporary claims that apartheid has been finally laid to rest. To sanitize the memory of this past there will
undoubtedly be a call for a Mandela Day similar to Martin Luther King Day in the United States. Judging, however, from the recent celebration of the ANC's eightieth anniversary in Bloemfontein, which the town's white population studiously ignored, there clearly is the potential for friction over the celebration of what will be seen as black South African holidays. Even in the United States of America, the celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday can still rally conservatives to oppose what they see as excessive concessions to the country's African-American population. How much more so will this be in the case for white South Africans who have grown up linking the ANC with godless communism? We can speculate that this opposition will also give rise to the determination on the part of the black population to use such holidays to make cultural as well as political statements. African-American history month in the United States of America is now more an opportunity to both criticize what is seen as the continuing racism of American society and an Afrocentric celebration rather than a simple remembrance of the civil rights victories of the 1960s.

In the long run all of these rather esoteric concerns may seem pretty small potatoes, especially when compared with the visionary dreams of the civil rights period or the grand designs of the anti-apartheid struggle. To a large extent this reflects of the tenor of the times in which the old ideological divides that served to exaggerate the importance of social conflicts, no longer apply. The Cold War predisposed us to see social change in cataclysmic proportions, but in reality change in the complex societies of today is much more subtle than this orientation assumed. The Afrocentric movement in the United States is an excellent example of this. In the long run perhaps its most important legacy will be in the field of education, where it has already forced a broadening of current educational horizons. Significantly, however, not only does this include space for Africa and African-American contributions, but also opportunities for other previously suppressed groups to assert their cultural identities. Indeed, seen in the context of American history, we can argue that there is nothing really revolutionary about this in the sense that it represents a departure from the norm. E Pluribus Unum may be the inscription on the Great Seal of the United States, but the reality is the hyphenated American who attests to the society's basically immigrant origin.

The uniqueness of the South African scene with its Zulu-centric, Xhosa-centric, Tswana-centric, Sesotho-centric, etc perspectives that the apartheid state fostered as part of its divide and rule strategy will undoubtedly add a very special dimension to the development of Pan-Africanist Afro-centricity in that country. While, on the other hand, the division among the country's black population may be the single most compelling reason for its development. I have argued for a special role for African-Americans in promoting this movement. It was Marcus Garvey's dream in the 1920s that African-Americans would be able to "redeem Africa" through the medium of the universal negro improvement association, headquartered in Harlem. By being resident in the world's most powerful country, in spite of their second class status, they were in a position to be the avant-garde of the black world. Today, in many respects, this is even more the case since now real links between the black diaspora and Africa are possible. In the 1940s the "polyrhythms and syncopated eights" of African American jazz found a resonance in the township shebeens of South Africa. As these two societies evolve in ways more similar to one another than the rest of the continent, their paths seems likely to converge in other Afrocentric ways as well.

Notes and references
5 Newsweek, 23 September 1991, p 46.
6 Molefi Asante, op cit, p 53.
9 Stokely Carmichael, "Toward black liberation", The Massachusetts Review 7, Autumn 1966, pp 639-651. Reflecting his own increasing identification with Africa, in the 1970s he changed his name to Kwame Toure as a way of identifying with the two most inspirational Pan-Africanists of the 1960s, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Toure of Guinea.
10 Newsweek, 23 September 1991, p 43.
11 Molefi Asante, op cit, p 2.
13 By "process" racism Asante means that rather than institutions having blanket rules against blacks joining them, special committees screen potential black members to see if they are suitable so that an exception can be made in their case.
14 Ibid, p 32.
15 Ibid, p 33.
16 Ibid, p 46.
18 Ivan van Sertima, They came before Columbus, Random House: 1976.