

Africology 101: An Interview with Scholar Activist Molefi Kete Asante

by

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Molefi Kete Asante (<http://www.asante.net>) is Professor of African American Studies in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. He is considered one of the most distinguished contemporary scholars, and has published 66 books, among the most recent being *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance* and *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony*. He has published more scholarly books than any contemporary African author and has been recognized as one of the ten most widely cited African Americans. Dr. Asante completed his M.A. at Pepperdine University, received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles at the age of 26 and was appointed a full professor at the age of 30 at the State University of New York at Buffalo; and notwithstanding, at Temple University he created the first Ph.D. program in African American Studies in 1987; he has directed more than 125 Ph.D. dissertations; written more than 300 articles for journals and magazines; he is the founding editor of *The Journal of Black Studies* (1969); the founder of the theory of Afrocentricity, and in 1995 he was made a traditional king, Nana Okru Asante Peasah, Kyldomhene of Tafo, Akyem, Ghana.

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First, thank you for this exclusive interview. You have done so much in the arena of Africology and in your personal life, thus it is indeed a great opportunity for our readers to become more acquainted with you, and your work.

Thanks, Itibari, I will be happy to provide you with as accurate an account as possible.

I understand that you have a new book titled An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance, can you give us an abstract of its contents, and second, tell us why you decided to once again clear the air on the Afrocentric perspective with a manifesto?

Yes, *An Afrocentric Manifesto* is published by Polity Press in England. Their interest was in how Afrocentricity has evolved since 1980 when I published the first book, *Afrocentricity*. My intention was to pinpoint critical issues confronting the theory, that is, the metatheory of Afrocentricity. So I needed to discuss the conceptual idea of Afrocentricity, place it in its own historical and philosophical context within African thought, demonstrate how it operates in relationship to pedagogical, sociolinguistic, historical, multicultural, and gendered discourse.

This meant that I had to examine a number of ideas around the construction of Afrocentricity in order to announce a human manifesto. But I paid attention to the arguments for and against Afrocentricity. Importantly I highlighted contemporary Afrocentric theorists such as Ama Mazama and Maulana Karenga who have been working on the philosophical and paradigmatic dimensions of the idea. In the end what the African manifesto intended was to provide a clear, coherent, and persuasive argument for a re-conceptualization of the way Africans view themselves and the way others have viewed Africans.

I have almost lost count of your publications, how many do you have thus far, and how do you evaluate this body of literature, in an historical context?

At this moment I have published 66 books and more than 300 articles. I am not in a position to evaluate them; this is something that others will have to do. I can tell you that my purpose is to provide books that I wish I had when I was a student. I can also say that I have always wanted to build the discipline of Africology, African American Studies. The field has always needed individuals who would give attention to the large conceptual issues of the discipline. Thus, I have spent my time so far trying to equip my colleagues and our students with the theoretical, methodological, encyclopedic, and other types of scholarly instruments that are necessary for a robust discourse. Without such materials we would simply be an aggregation of people with no real substantive core.

In terms of time, how do you manage your time so that you can continue to be so productive and creative, throughout the years? What is your secret?

My secret is quite in the open. I enjoy reading and writing. These are activities that you cannot do without reflection, sitting down and doing the work. I try to write something every day. Sometimes I write only a page; other days I write twenty or thirty pages. There is no special time that I have to write; my computer is always available and I take lots of notes, copy new metaphors, create word plays in my mind and record them, and stay home in my large library a lot.

In your opinion, what have been the most significant achievements in Africology, and why do you view them as such?

The most significant contribution of Africology is that it has impacted all of the social sciences in ways that have changed them forever. It is because of us that sociologists do not speak the language of deprivation, disadvantaged, and minority in their best literature. It is because of that historians are willing to see black lives as critically important to a full understanding of the American society. They do not use the terms Bushman, Hottentots, pygmies, tribes, and primitives, as much as they used to before 1980. In effect, we have changed the language of the social sciences and reinvented the discourse around African people. We have become agents in our own history.

Now that many of the original advocates and pioneers of Africology in the academy are in or nearing retirement, how do you see its future in academe?

The future is very bright. There are some obstacles that must be overcome, but for the most part we have engaged the main monsters that lurked in the corners of the academy and those who come after us will find a strong foundation. I have been the advisor for more than 130 doctoral students. Now all of those students will not be in the universities and colleges but the majority of them will be and they will be making changes and creating conditions for the advancement of science. Already they are occupying key roles as distinguished professors, heads of departments, research professors, and authors of their own books.

My students have published more than 100 books. One of my former students has published over 25 books himself. There are others who have cornered the discourse on Africana philosophy, Afrocentricity and theory, Afrocentric perspectives on race and racism, the black male, African American history, and slavery and medicine, and many other topics. I am an optimist about this new generation. It is the old generation, not vested in Africology; that will continue to create problems until we all retire.

What are some of the key productive themes or concepts in Africology that we should examine as we form new research questions?

Some key ideas are location, dislocation, orientation, centeredness, and agency. How do you interpret economics from an Afrocentric perspective? Is it possible to view an African or African American culture form as the key to economics, for example, relationships? What are the implications of agency for inter-African relationships? How can we reinvent African diasporic history in the light of the narrative told by Africans themselves?

In your work you mention disciplinary suicide, is such concern less when we begin to look at other disciplines as an assisting discipline, rather than as a competing discipline?

Well, I do not see us as an assisting discipline; we are a new paradigm that is in need of scholars who will bring a diversity of interests to the discipline. One could be interested in music, historical issues, and mental processes and be an Africologist. This means that one must commit discipline suicide if one is trained in history, economics, political science, psychology, communication, sociology, and so forth. You do not have to lose interest in those topics but you must discover another method of approaching and a new theory to explain the phenomena.

Based on your years of experience, what advise do you have for new scholars in Africology?

I think that we should never forget our revolutionary origin. The intent of those who created the discipline was to make a difference in the lives of African people. It was more about societal transformation than it was about careerism or public intellectualism. We were on our way to creating a new platform for rescuing our communities from the oppressive situations we knew firsthand.

How can Africology become more relevant to the challenges and opportunities in the non-academic African world community?

We must be actively involved in all major issues confronting our communities wherever in the world they are. This means that we must engage the world on questions of ethics, war, terror, freedom, and democracy. We should give no space to those who would ask us to take a back seat in these questions. Yes, we should be out front in protecting our community from self destruction. We must promote African culture as a way to interpret many realities. Join the Pan African organizations such as Trans Africa Forum and participate in the communities activities around black empowerment.

In your book The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony, you report that indigenous ideas, African concepts, and traditional outlooks have escaped the writing of African history in the West. How has that happened, and what can we do to change it?

I am happy that you mention this book because I believe it brings together all of the concepts and ideas that I believe in. I wanted to write a work that would be Afrocentric, identify our agency, and have nobility. I was eager to interrogate the narratives of Africans themselves, to question African customs, traditions, and wisdom. This is how we change the writing of our history; we write it.

As a leading activist-intellectual of Africology, what is and has been the scope and importance of the Cheikh Anta Diop International Conference and the 'International Conference of African Intellectuals' meetings in held Dakar, Senegal, and Salvador, Brazil?

The Cheikh Anta Diop International Conference of Afrocentrists was started in 1988, two years after the death of Cheikh Anta Diop. It has been the largest and most dynamic meeting of scholars of African antiquity in the nation. The Diop Conference brings together new and old scholars who are Afrocentric in their research. Unlike the more general interest group, ASCAC, which includes a variety of travelers, orators, and inspirational speakers on ancient Kemet, the Diop Conference was chartered as an organization that would keep the focus on intellectual and scholarly research in classical Africa. On the other hand, the International Conference of African Intellectuals is an association created by the African Union to urge African intellectuals to engage in the political process. The governments are asking for the best knowledge they can find from Africans from all over the world. I was one of the 12 people selected to give a keynote address at the Dakar meeting. I also spoke at the Salvador meeting. These series of meetings have brought together more than 1500 intellectuals from the Black World.

What concerns (if any) do you have with the slow progress in naming academic units 'Africology' in academe?

Well, I have a lot of concern. I am in a department where there are two of us who believe that we should change the name but there are others who do not seem to have the same disciplinary inclinations as we do or they create obstruction simply because it is proposed by the Afrocentrists in the department. One can never underestimate the power of the lack of consciousness.

Considering the wealth of knowledge and talent within the Africological community, in your opinion why have so few created independent community institutes or think tanks in the U.S., and in other parts of the world?

You need consciousness, knowledge and money. We have not yet had enough people who have knowledge and money to establish such think tanks. There are people with knowledge and there are people with money, but we do not have enough people with money and consciousness to create such think tanks. In other communities the wealthy people as philanthropists create such institutes. We have not yet reached that level of long term thinking and action. It will come but it will not come until we have created those individuals who want to make it happen. I certainly believe we need think tanks who do nothing more than think about how to promote the health of the African world.

In this discussion I have no doubt that we could talk for days about you, your work and the state of Africology, but since we don't have that luxury, is there some parting words, thoughts or statements you would like to share with our readers?

One of the areas that I have worked in quite extensively is education in the public schools. I wrote the African American History course proposal for the Philadelphia School District soon after I had written the high school text, *African American History: A Journey of Liberation*. We have to keep Africology engaged with education. Afrocentric education is a fundamental necessity for anyone declaring competence in almost any subject in America; otherwise the person remains essentially ignorant of a major portion of the world. One of our goals is to insure that our discipline plays an important role in the educational process.