

African Cultural Consciousness and African-Centered Historiography as Preconditions for Wilson’s New World Order

by

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Abstract

This paper sketches a framework for understanding the relationship between African cultural consciousness and the liberation of African people. Special attention will be given to the role of Pan-Africanism and Marcus Garvey’s movement in facilitating the restoration of African cultural consciousness. The present analysis builds on the framework outlined in Wilson’s “African-centered consciousness and the new world order” as well as theory and research evolving out of African-centered historiography and psychology (e.g., see Akbar, 2003; Carruthers, 1984, 1999; Diop, 1974, 1987, 1991; Kambon, 2012; Karenga, 2006; Williams, 1960, 1976). Toward this end, it provides an historical and psychological context for his central arguments.

Keywords: African Cultural Consciousness, African-centered historiography, African-centered psychology, Amos Wilson

Introduction

At the heart of Wilson's analysis of the problems confronting African people is the notion that Africans are negotiating reality with a Eurocentric consciousness. This Eurocentric consciousness, while projected as normal, healthy, and universal, is actually a major source of the social, political, economic, health, and psychological problems of Africans in America and throughout the world. He provides insightful and colorful examples of how a Eurocentric consciousness impacts the physical and psychological health of Blacks. His work clearly illustrates how a Eurocentric consciousness manifest in several classical notions of the mental health consequences of psychological/cultural oppression (Baldwin, 1980, 1985), including Fanon's conception of "wearing the White mask" to Akbar's nosology of mental disorders (Akbar, 1980; Fanon, 1967). A central theme common to the dysfunctions associated with this alien cultural consciousness is that they are negatively related to an African-centered historical, cultural consciousness (Baldwin, 1984).

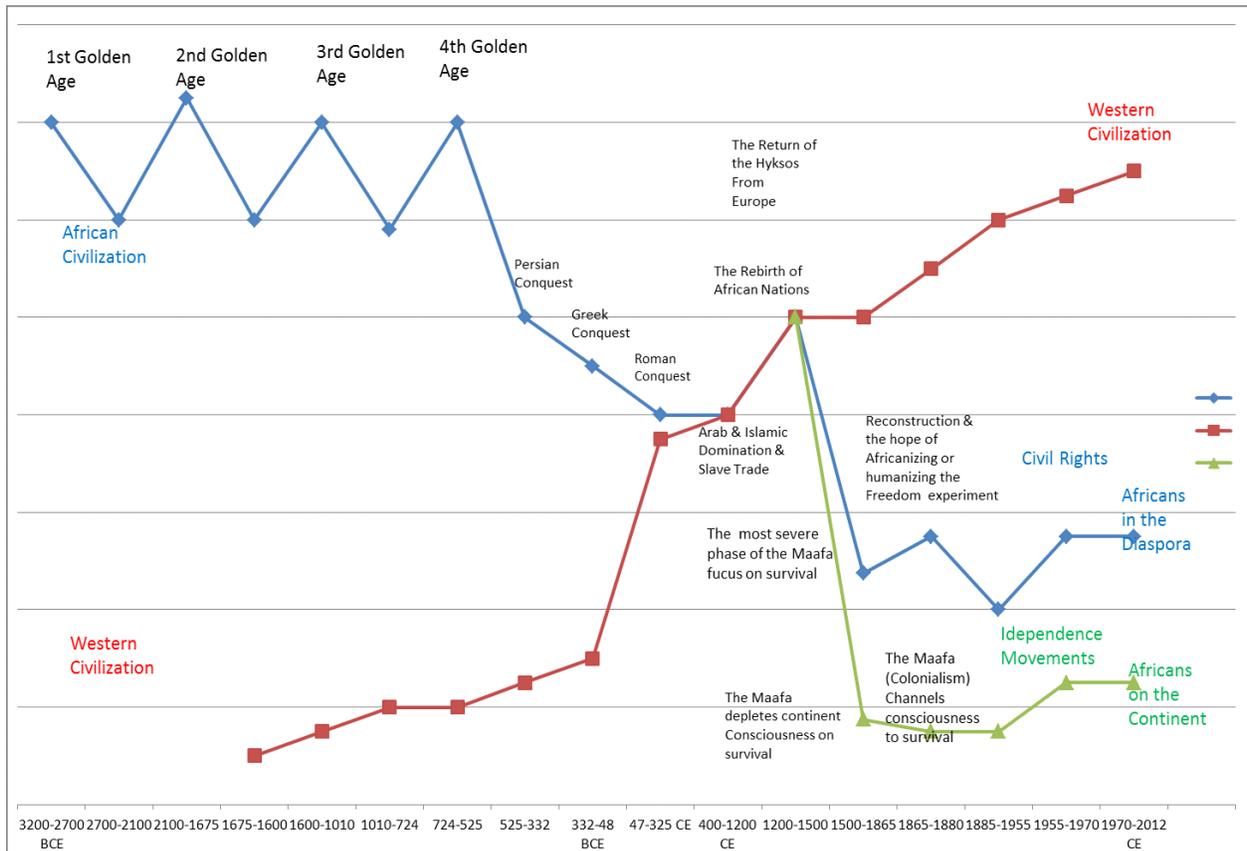
Drawing on Kambon's psychology of oppression model (Baldwin, 1980, 1985; Kambon, 2003, 2012), we can better understand the nature and prevalence of this anti-African self-consciousness among African people. Through control of the dominant socio-cultural institutions that shape the enculturation process, White people have been able to reinforce and superimpose a Eurocentric consciousness on top of Blacks' African cultural consciousness, causing it to become weakened and distorted. In other words, the nature of the psychological oppression of African people is that the normal, natural African-centered consciousness has been distorted, set off-track, and /or suppressed. The challenge faced by African people at this juncture in history is how to develop a self-consciousness that ultimately facilitates African development rather than undermines it. This type of consciousness is what Wilson calls an African-centered consciousness, which is similar to what Kambon calls African self-consciousness (Baldwin/Kambon, 1981, 1994, 1998) and what we refer to in this paper as African cultural consciousness.

The Rise and Decline of African Cultural Consciousness

As is illustrated in Figure 1, during the dawn of civilization African cultural-consciousness was the light for the world (ben-Jochannan, 1971; Breasted, 1938; Diop, 1974, 1991; Van Sertima, 2002). For more than three thousand years during the early history of civilization, African culture inspired African people with a social mission, a moral ideal, and a drive to sustain and protect those cultural ideals while building the educational-technological landscape of human intellectual expression (Carruthers, 1986; Karenga, 2006). They resisted threats to their cultural ideals and repeatedly restored the African way after periods of disruption, disintegration, and cultural decline resulting from invasions and foreign influences.

Their resistance, however, wore thin after the 25th Dynasty (or the last Golden Age) in Kemet (Ben-Levi, 1986; Carruthers, 1999, Diop, 1991, Williams, 1976). The flood gates were then opened for various Eurasian and European groups to make their contribution toward the decline and disintegration of African civilization and culture (see e.g., Grantham (2003) and Williams (1976) for a few good illustrations).

Figure1 The Rise and Decline of African Civilization and Cultural Consciousness.



For the next 2000 or so years of Eurasian and Western European invasions and military conquests, African cultural-consciousness became increasingly under attack and progressively weakened, first on the continent and then in the diaspora. On both the continent and in the diaspora, resistance to Eurasian and European aggression had been strong (see e.g., Carruthers, 1985; Harding, 1981; Williams, 1976). For example, the forty-year resistance and development advanced by Queen Nzingha of Angola is memorable for both its restoration of African cultural consciousness and her ability to see the savagery and evil intentions of Whites toward Blacks, even when camouflaged by trade, treaties, and religion (Chu & Elliot, 1990; Sweetman, 1970; Williams, 1976).

Several hundred years later in the African diaspora of the Americas, Africans in Haiti, led by Toussaint and Dessalines, were able to see through the camouflage and for a brief historical moment liberate Haiti from the French (Carruthers, 1985; James, 1938).

Despite the continual resistance of African people to European and Eurasian aggression, they continued attempts to operationalize African cultural consciousness through the development of nations and empires throughout central and western Africa (Jackson, 1971). Perhaps the most consequential psychological effect of those “2000 seasons” was that they slowly eroded the historical cultural consciousness of Africans. It was this period of protracted contact with foreign invasions that probably contributed most significantly toward disconnecting classical African civilizations in Kemet and the Nile Valley from new nations that emerged in the southern, central, and western regions of Africa. One of the long term psychological-political effects of this disconnection was that it left Africans vulnerable and void of an historical context for explaining the nature of both the Eurasian and European aggression as well as their increasingly weakened and fragmented national consciousness. It led them to personalize and isolate the external aggression and national disintegration, rather than see it in its interconnecting racial-cultural, historical context. Hence, prior to, and during, the Maafa, the void in historical, cultural consciousness led, in many instances, to a misdiagnosis of the problem. As Figure 1 illustrates, the Maafa just exasperated the problem. The fragmentation in African cultural consciousness took an accelerated turn after significant periods of socio-cultural destabilization and migration, the initiation of the of Arab slave trade after the 7th century, and the coming of the European slave trade after the 15th century.

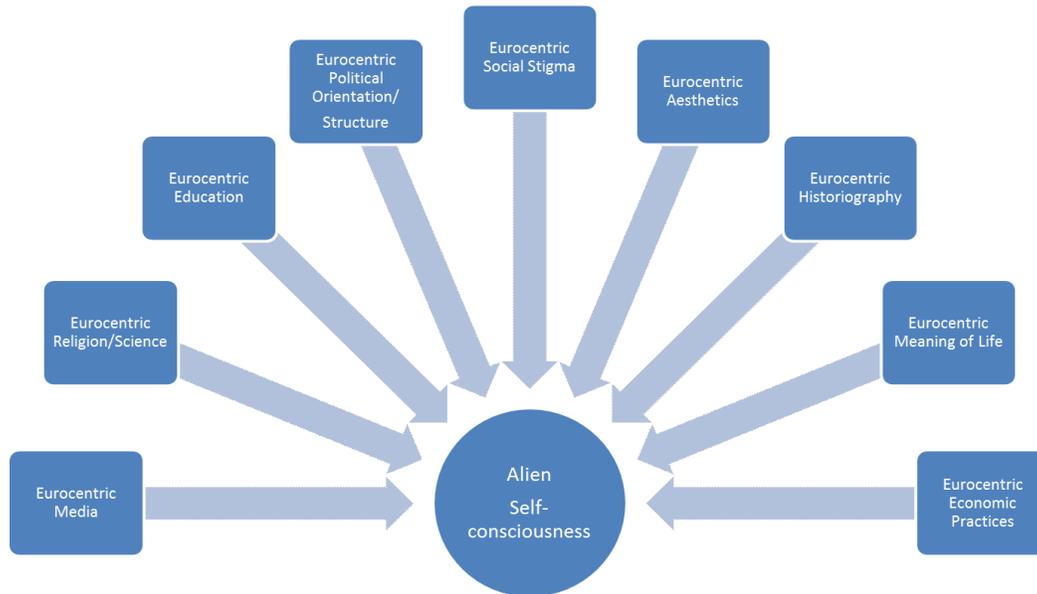
The Maafa and African Cultural Consciousness

The Maafa was probably the most devastating psychological blow to African-centered cultural consciousness. It was perhaps the most severe single period to impact the psychological functioning of African people for two basic reasons 1) it abruptly divided their consciousness and channeled it away from development and the normal contingencies of living to that of survival (and survival under unprecedented conditions) and 2) it began a long, systematic, and concerted campaign to dominate the resources and control the cultural consciousness of African people (Kambon, 2012; Wright, 1979). For the last 500 years, the Maafa depleted African people and nations of essential resources for their development, namely human capital, expert knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as a sense of normality, order, and security—essential elements for civilized life(see e.g., Aptheker, 1993; Bennett, 1999; Diop, 1991; Harding, 1981; Jones, 1997; Quarles, 1969; Williams, 1976). The most severe phase of the maafa also served to further fragment an already fragmented African cultural consciousness. The outcome of this fragmentation was (and remains) disintegration at all levels of consciousness (history, language, and culture) and all levels of social organization (national, community, family, and personal).

What do we mean by fragmentation? In a broad sense, cultural fragmentation suggests that the normal interrelations among elements of the social system no longer hold or have become disintegrated. In some instances this may reflect a temporary disruption as in a major social crisis (e.g., a natural disaster) and in others it may reflect more extended periods of disruption as in the terror imposed by a foreign power occupying and imposing its social order via force, or the forceful dislocation and enslavement of a cultural group. In either case, what remains are elements common to the fabric of the indigenous cultural system. In some cases, only the quintessence of the cultural system survives, or what Nobles (1986) call cultural factors, the deepest level of cultural expression. Within this framework, the surviving cultural deep-structure or cosmology (Ani, 1994; Baldwin & Hopkins, 1990; Dixon, 1976; Kambon, 1992) serve as a blueprint or foundation regulating both conscious and unconscious behavior. Hence, fragmentation doesn't mean destroyed; it means that some of the more critical, substantive elements of African culture survived. And this analysis suggests that a fuller, more conscious, institutionalized expression of this cultural deep-structure must be restored in order to facilitate the liberation and empowerment of African people the world over.

The weakened state that emerged among African nations resulting from this fragmentation led to what may be thought of as the wholesale implementation of the Portuguese plan—The Regimento—by European nations with the slave trade and in 1885 at the Berlin Conference (Armah, 2010; Clark, 1991; Williams, 1976). For the next 100 years after the American Civil War and the Berlin Conference, African cultural consciousness came under the most concerted and sophisticated campaign to undermine and distort it than during all those “2000 seasons” and the Maafa. The psychological consequence of this prolonged attack was the imposition of a Eurocentric historical and cultural consciousness on the African self-consciousness. The outcome of this method of control, the western world thought, would solidify the continued subordination of African people and the world domination of Europeans for centuries to come, if not eternity. A graphical illustration of the dynamics of this process is provided in Figure 2. One statement that clearly illustrates the unadulterated commitment of Whites toward control of the African reality and consciousness was uttered by a delegate in the Virginia House of Delegates after having passed a bill prohibiting the education of Blacks: “We have as far as possible closed every avenue by which light may enter their minds. If we could extinguish the capacity to see light, our work would be completed...” (Weber, 1978, pp. 29)

Figure 2 A Schematic of Processes Involved in Creating an Alien/Eurocentric Cultural Consciousness



And it is only now that Africans are becoming equipped with the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to break the psychologically incarcerating shield of this centuries-old, encrusted Eurocentric consciousness, and it is at this juncture in history that Africans must make a concerted effort toward this end. For as Amos Wilson and others have argued (Armah, 2010; Carruthers, 1999; Kambon, 2012; Karenga, 2002; Wright, 1979, 1984), unless the Eurocentric cultural consciousness is replaced with an African-centered consciousness and historiography, liberation and the restoration of an African world order are not only impossible, they are unthinkable.

Preconditions for African liberation/Nation Building

Since the beginning of the Maafa, struggling to find dry ground from which to build a concerted, final march toward liberation has consumed the consciousness and collective wisdom of African people. The African world is on dry ground now and it has been seeking its footing for about 50 years. Research suggests that the present state of instability stems, in part, from its continued uncertain and conflicting historical understanding of its past and a full appreciation of its philosophical and cultural heritage. Consequently, at this juncture in history, the African world is uncertain and divided over how to proceed and which route to take. This is analogous to being at the proverbial crossroads (Clark, 1991). The direction African people take will depend on which type of self-consciousness they plan to strengthen and how effective they are in institutionalizing it.

Let it not be forgotten, however, that the struggle to get on this dry ground was ushered in by the fundamental core African cultural consciousness that remained in each fragment that survived into the Maafa. As we noted earlier, fragmentation doesn't mean destroyed. In a critical reading of the cumulative scientific evidence, the record reveals that what remained in each transmitted or inherited fragment was our African sense of human purpose, direction, community, character, and logic. The cultural substance of those fragments is what undergirded the inspiration and drive to persist against all odds to find dry ground.

In no area was the deep structure of African cultural consciousness more evident than in their conception of God and projections about the spiritual-moral universe (Danquah, 1944; Walker, 1965; Weber, 1978; Wilmore, 1986; Woodson, 1919). The record clearly shows that during the most severe phase of the maafa in America (the first 250 years or so), Africans never fully agreed with the Eurocentric conception of God, the Eurocentric Christian views of the divine purpose for slaves, or even the Eurocentric notions about the purpose of religion. For the record reveals that Africans in America used Christianity during that period as a camouflage to implement their conception of God, moral ideals, and cultural understanding of the purpose of religion to advance their struggles to reach dry ground and achieve liberation.¹ The record also reveals that on the continent, traditional African religious philosophy and practices were maintained and governed much of the resistance to slavery and colonialism as well (Ani, 1994; Danquah, 1944; Deng, 1995).

The first rung in this climb to dry ground was to destroy the slave trade and physical slavery, i.e., to restore a sense of physical control to the self. The second rung in this climb to dry ground was to destroy barriers to social opportunity and development, i.e., to secure civil rights. In the midst of trying to adjust to the increased attack on African cultural consciousness, as manifested by the practice of Jim Crow in America and colonialism in Africa (Rodney, 1974), the social opportunity and development struggles were mired in internal conflict, both in America and Africa (Cruse, 1967/1984, 1987; Goldfield, 1997; Post, 1972). In America, the social opportunity struggle was divided over industrial opportunity versus citizenship (Cruse, 1987; Giddings, 1984); whereas, in Africa, development struggles were divided over securing more rights from colonial powers for the colonial appointed leaders versus the colony (Post, 1972). Because leaders on both sides of these internal conflicts were primarily guided by a Eurocentric consciousness, they all failed to see that the common threat to both sides was the European and that their appeals for justice would fall on deaf ears. According to Ron Walters (2003), a similar pattern exists in contemporary African American political behavior, and for the same reasons-- they fail to recognize White nationalism and white supremacy as the chief political philosophy of White people in America and their political and economic leaders.

Pan-Africanism and African Cultural Consciousness

Although the citizenship rights and the colony rights groups would ultimately represent the dominant paths taken in these struggles for dry ground, it took approximately 70 years to get there (on dry ground); about 30 years sooner than the 100 years predicted by T. Thomas Fortune in 1890 (see Cruse, 1987). It is possible that achieving the goals of both struggles were hastened by the emergence of Marcus Garvey. For, if ever there was one African that caused the European world to rethink its African strategy, it was Marcus Garvey. His call of “Africa for Africans” ushered in Pan-Africanism in a way that sustained and inspired nationalism movements and leaders all over Africa and the diaspora (Clarke, 1991; Jacques-Garvey, 1982; Martin, 1976; Williams, 1960). Perhaps as a means to halt the tide of Pan-Africanism that was threatening to sweep the continent and to stave off the greatest threat to European world domination—Pan Africa-- European powers accelerated their concessions to the demands of Africans in both America and Africa. By conceding to demands for independence in Africa and citizenship in America, Whites would not have to give up their stronghold on the real source of their power over Africans, only the face of that power.

For in both America and Africa, conceding to the demands of both groups would allow attacks on African cultural consciousness to operate more effectively and the solidification of European control to be achieved more efficiently. In both cases, there was not one fundamental change in the operating facts of either 1) the control of African resources (Nkrumah, 1965; Rodney, 1974) or 2) the campaign to undermine, distort, and culturally misorient the self-consciousness of Africans (see e.g., Jones, 1997; Welsing, 1991). In fact, conceding to full citizenship and independence removed both as legitimate sources of criticism and possibly escalating African resistance. African nations were now free. Free to do the things heretofore they had been prevented from doing, like making political decisions, voting, living where they choose, governing themselves, to study, etc. All of their desired freedoms were granted *without any fundamental changes* in the European anti-African cultural campaign and the European powers’ economic control and political influence in Africa (Armah, 2010; Nkrumah, 1965; Rodney, 1974; Williams, 1960). The contemporary outcomes of economic aid to African nations could have been expressly designed toward these ends as well (see e.g., Moyo’s (2009) discussion on the history and impact of aid in Africa).

In Africa and America, Blacks, with their newly acquired freedoms, still had to operate under social, political, and economic conditions that were overtly anti-African. This is why it took 100 years after the civil war for Blacks to be granted full citizenship rights and to find dry ground. It is here, on what appears to be dry ground, where the fragmented consciousness coupled with a dominant Eurocentric consciousness is confronted with its greatest challenges for individuals, nations, and leaders of national groups in the diaspora (Akoto, 1992). Being on dry ground without an African-centered consciousness becomes particularly challenging for individuals because of their tendency to personalize or individualize their mistreatment and for heads-of-state or national leaders, because of their tendency to isolate and misdiagnose their national predicaments and interests.

Regardless how one wants to weight the effects of Garvey and the UNIA on the independence and citizenship struggles of African people, Garvey must be given credit as the single most powerful influence on the development of pan-Africanism (Williams, 1960). His drive to unite Blacks everywhere, and have Africans control the political and economic resources of Africa caused both Blacks and Whites to think about the implications of such a vision. His vision served to inspire African leaders all over the world, particularly the most ardent advocates of Pan-Africanism (e.g., Kwame Nkrumah). Garveyism served as the beginning of the restoration of African-centered consciousness in the 20th century. Just as his philosophy sparked Pan-Africanism it also laid the foundation for, and possibly ushered in the development of, the cultural philosophy that would be essential to the restoration of an African-centered consciousness and African-centered thought, or what has been called “Afrocentricity” (AAH, 1973; Asante, 1981; Carruthers, 1981; Clarke, 1991).

In other words, Garveyism had all the critical elements for restoring an African-centered consciousness except the cultural philosophy that he inspired, but would not gain momentum as a full blown movement until the civil rights struggle began its decline as a broad based emphasis among Africans in the diaspora. As a philosophical, cultural, and historical paradigm, Afrocentricity or African-centered thought emerged as the missing link in the liberation struggles of African people (AAH, 1973). It provides the bases for Pan-Africanism and African nationalism for Africans in the diaspora. It provides Africans with a framework, derived from their collective wisdom, for wrestling with the contingencies of living; it allows Africans to begin—again--a conscious dialogue, as Karenga (2002) has argued, with African culture for solutions to our personal and collective problems as we seek to improve our quality of life and liberation; it provides Africans with a framework for dealing with the predicaments of oppression, as Molefi Asante has argued (1981); and in the final analysis, it serves as the foundation for restoring an African-centered consciousness; for only when an African-center consciousness is restored will the world, for the first time in 2000 years, have to deal with Africans as Africans.

The Restoration of African Cultural Consciousness: Concluding Thoughts

How then must African people proceed toward reconstructing an African cultural consciousness? What sign-posts would indicate that progress is being made and the route that should be taken at the crossroads? Although history serves as the best guide for how to proceed, there are a few critical factors and practices that must undergird the restoration challenge ahead.

- 1) The restoration of African cultural consciousness is going to have to be part of a very big, grand vision for the world and the role of Africans in the world. The aim has to be clearly focused on restoring control of African behavior to Africans. A grand vision is what made Garvey so effective—he was bold in his solutions to the Black man’s problems. Africans must move into the driver’s seat to steer the course of civilization, proclaimed Garvey.

The philosophical, historical, and cultural bases for bringing such a vision into being is the substance of Afrocentricity or the African-centered paradigm, but the vehicles for operationalizing this vision is the new battle ground—institutional control. Only when African-centered control or influence over the critical economic, political, and educational institutions defining the context of African survival is achieved will African nations and Africans in the diaspora be able to shape their destiny and the direction of civilization. Organized power is what the world respects and the manifestation of that organized power is institutional control (Delany, 1852; Williams, 1976; Wilson, 1998)

- 2) Restoring African cultural consciousness will have to be part of a planned, organized program/strategy. The activities of such a program must impact individuals at every level of understanding and at every social, political, and economic level of existence. A quiet, and often overlooked, fact of the success of the civil rights struggles in America was the ability to make the issues and goals understandable to all and provide avenues for involvement by Blacks at every level, particularly those at the lower socioeconomic and educational levels (Moses & Cobb, 2001). This pattern was the source of success for the institutionalized liberation struggles in America during the 1830-1850's, wherein Blacks in the north and south collaborated in their struggles for liberation (Harding, 1981); perhaps, heightening the controversy undergirding the American Civil war and even hastening its inevitability.
- 3) Second only to restoring an African cultural consciousness is the restoration of the centrality of African womanhood and motherhood (see discussions on this issue by Diop, 1978; Giddings, 1984; Williams, 1960). The best African minds must be deeply engaged with how best to restore an African democracy that builds in the centrality of women and motherhood in the functioning of society at all levels (i.e., national, community, and family) and in all areas, including politics, religion, and economics.

We have argued that African cultural consciousness is a necessary means by which African liberation and empowerment can be achieved. However, the reader should understand that this way of life can only be sustained through institutionalized practices and economic productivity undergirded by an African-centered philosophy and paradigm for living. For this is the way Africans did it in the beginning and this is the only way humans have done it throughout history.

Notes

1. For a rather insightful historical analysis on how Africans used Christianity as a cover to inculcate essential African cultural fragments and liberations strategies see Wilmore (1986); a consistent albeit briefer presentation on this point is provided by Weber (1978). There was a shift away from traditional African interpretations and functional roles of religion among Blacks, but this shift occurred gradually and occurred more in form than substance, perhaps corresponding with the degree of acculturation or cultural misorientation. The social engagement role of religion is one area where researchers have noticed the greatest divergence in traditions (see Karenga (2002) for a discussion on this point). Although establishing the African cultural bases of African American culture is beyond the focus of this article, it could be easily demonstrated that every aspect of African American culture is undergirded by the African cultural deep-structure that survived into the Maafa, including music, art, family practices, social organization, governance, etc. This is the case many researchers have, more or less, directly argued (see for example Blyden, 1908; Herskovits, 1941; Kenny, 1971; Levine, 1977; Nobles & Goddard, 1984; Southern, 1983; Vansertima, 1971, 2002; Wimby, 1986).

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