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***Afrocentricity in African New Religious and Spiritual Movements***

John Samuel Mbiti claims in *African Religions and Philosophy* that: 'People do not know how to exist without religion',[[1]](#footnote-1) and 'Wherever an African is, there is his religion'. The connections between new religious movements and Africa remain particularly problematic. This paper addresses this issue in relation to Afrocentricity theory which is connected with the development of African new religious movements. My aim in this paper is to investigate the concept of Afrocentricity and how its logic shows itself within African new religious movements.

**Frontiers of comparison**

The term 'New Religious Movement' was introduced for the first time by Harold W. Turner (1911-2002) who confined his studies and researches chiefly to the African continent. According to Turner, the religious landscape in Africa was so varied and distinctive that the particular movements found there had to be designated by different names. But more importantly, what Turner points out is that the impact of western culture and missionary domination has changed African traditions, offering new forms of religion in what were called ‘Modern African Religious Movements’. This expression emerged between the 17th and 19th centuries with the contact between western Christianity in the shape of Portuguese, German, Dutch, French and British missionaries and the traditional religions and spiritualities of Africa and the Caribbean. Turner defined the African new religious movements as ‘founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Kofi Appiah-Kubi, a Ghanaian historian of religion, has also supported Turner’s theory, saying that the movements have mainly African adepts and as well African leadership.[[3]](#footnote-3) All African new religious movements have always been intended to be primarily for Africans and have all African membership. In fact, African new religious movements have already started to penetrate many parts of the non-African world such as France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe, Australia, India, Latin America, New Zealand, the United States and Japan. Thus African new religious movements have spread beyond African territory, and their followers believe, with a sense of triumph and pride, that now is the time that Africa is going to ‘evangelize’ the ‘white’ world. No-one, unfortunately, knows the exact number of African new religious movements. It would be impossible for anyone to try to update and record accurately the numbers and statistics, since the African new movements seem to have a high level of proliferation worldwide. One can observe that African new religious movements have emerged under colonialism, neo-colonialism and apartheid. The number of African new religious movements has increased *in  protest against*social, economic, political and cultural oppression. However, the reason for the emergence of African new religious movements is essentially religious, and there has been a plethora of varied terminology applied to them, including terms such as separatist, messianic, millenarian, nativistic, prophetic, neo-Pentecostal, syncretic, revivalistic, cultist, therapeutic, charismatic, ecstatic and postcolonial, among others.

African new religious movements have been seen as agents of social and cultural change, from Liberation and Black Theologies, Pentecostalism, Secret Societies, Yoruba Religion and African-derived religions in the Caribbean and Latin America such as the RastafarI movement, Vodou, Santeria, Candomblé and the Brazilian Quimbanda, to feminist and postcolonial theologies (including womanist theologies). These movements throughout Africa and the Americas have moved away subversively from the dominant religions, identifying Africa as a symbolic, defensive place to respond to oppression and to advocate black-sexual privileges (the politics of racial justice and gender equality). African religions are expanding more and more, and are attracting globally both black and white people. They have been considered to be religions of divination, healing, dance and spirit possession. Indeed, one can find Rasta and Vodou priestesses in Africa, America and Europe. For example, Mama Lola, the contemporary leader of Vodou women’s spirit movement in Brooklyn, reclaims African magic and represents the rebirth of matriarchal religion centred on Mother Africa with Africa-based spirits. Her movement has maintained African spirituality and offers divine inspiration and freedom for women.

**The Afrocentric legacy in African new religious movements**

Afrocentrism is a comprehensive term which refers to the nature of African new religious movements and spiritualities. The term ‘Afrocentricity’, which is at the centre of my analysis, includes, in all its aspects, the socio-cultural and religious significance of being African, and tends be culturally conservative. Afrocentricity, by definition, is a contest for space, a moment of inspiration for African people and for those in the Diaspora who advocate their political, cultural and religious equality. Afrocentricity is a Pan-African ideology dedicated to African people and their descendants in the rest of the world, in response to Eurocentric psychology. The term has been used by the African-American scholar and philosopher Molefi Asante (1942- ), who applied Afrocentricity to social and political sciences; he defined it as ‘the belief in the centrality of Africans in post modern history’ for Africans (Asante 1980, p. 9). In recent decades, Chiekh Anta Diop in *The African Origin of Civilization* (1994) and Molefe Asante in *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998) have developed a new approach to the study of the African cultures of the Diaspora. Both challenge us to understand Africa from a less Eurocentric view, rejecting any traces of cultural hegemony. Diop and Asante’s ideas on African identity were influenced by African-American precursors such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, Malcolm X, Marcus Mosiah Garvey and Martin Luther King, who created an African perspective on politics, economics and religion.

The study of Africa does not mean merely the conventional study of 'black' people, employing a Eurocentric attitude which scrutinizes the object of its investigation as a phenomenon which is extraneous and peripheral. On the contrary, as argued by Asante, a contemporary student of twentieth century Pan-African movements in the African-American Diaspora, Africology should help to open a new door to the African heritage, and facilitate a rediscovery of African culture. Africology moves away from the static notions of many western disciplines; it is in continual expansion and has a pluralistic, comparative, dynamic and creative approach to, and perspective on, the study of Africa. As Asante claims:

In this sense africology opens the doors to our selves; whatever there is that is negative in our persons is measured by a new formula; and whatever is positive is also by the same Afrocentric formula.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Asante's observation concerns the crystallized, fixed methods used in the study of Africa and ‘African’ people. Africology employs a radical and progressive African perspective or Afrocentric interpretation which guides African and non-African people to establish a new vision of Africa that will transform the way we think of science, history, religion, fashion, architecture, music and ethics. It will be a renaissance more powerful – as Asante stresses – than anything a neo-Greek revival could imagine.[[5]](#footnote-5) This will guide Africans to their Afrocentric change and liberation.

The concept of Afrocentricity is employed to identify the rich diversity of African culture and religion as expressed in their oral history, rituals and ceremonies. Afrocentricity seeks to operate in the interests of African identity. Afrocentricity is a term which finds its inspirational source in the thought of Asante. Asante's radical thinking re-examines from an anti-Eurocentric perspective Africa's own history and culture before the European invasions. The Afrocentric paradigm and dynamic rediscovers and repositions the centrality of African people and is rooted in the cultural interests of Africans. In other words, to be Afrocentric does not mean wearing African clothes or having an African name. Indeed, one can be born in Africa, can have African descendants or can follow an African style of living but not be African in oneself. Afrocentricity is a social, cultural and spiritual practice for people who want to determine and re-build the self of the person and of the community, giving dignity with new African beliefs and perceptions. Central to Afrocentricity is ‘*Nija*’ which is defined by Asante as ‘the collective expression of Afrocentric worldview which is grounded in the historical experience of African people’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nija is the spiritual and meditative source for African people and is based on the worship of spirits through African ritual objects, talismans, icons, poetry and music. It is generally practiced on a Sunday but can also be done at other times. Nija consists of six elements:

1. Libation to Ancestors
2. Poetical and Musical Creativity and Expression
3. Nommo: Generative Word Power
4. Affirmation
5. Teaching from Nija
6. Libation to Posterity [[7]](#footnote-7)

The libation is dedicated to the ancestors and it is performed before all meetings of Nija. Water is used during the Nija practices and is put in three vases with a flag (red, green, and black) which is the symbol of liberation. Fruits and juices are shared during the informal reunions by the members of Nija. The teachings of Nija are essentially based on African literature, with the singing of songs, playing of drums and teaching or production of particular African art forms. During the meetings Africans discuss African history and everyday matters. At each libation the libator invokes the spirits of African people to find their origins,” who they are and the truth from Africa”. With the conclusion of the libation the members of the Nija raise their right hand for ‘harambees’, which means pulling together in Kiswahili. The place of cult should be Afrocentric and designed by an Afrocentric architect who will produce a building with the libation table in the middle.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Nija* is an example of a pure form of Afrocentrism and African new religious movements. It reflects the presence of African spirituality and consciousness. The teaching of Nija expresses the connection both with the African past (celebrating precursors such as Kareng’s Kawaida, Elijah’s Islam, Garvey’s Transmigration, and Blyden’s Intellectualism[[9]](#footnote-9)) and also with the future. Asante’s Nija movement is an African new religious movement of the contemporary African Diaspora. Indeed, African new religious movements and spiritualities are built around the thesis of Afrocentricity. The Afrocentric discourse has been an important aspect for African social, racial and spiritual independence ('the *African* national renaissance'[[10]](#footnote-10)) of the 'Black Skins', as the activist Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon called them, from the hegemonic schemes of ‘White Europe’. African new religious movements advocate the repossession of the past culture as a cornerstone of their African identity.

The concept of African new religious movements and spiritualities emerged in Africa and in the Diaspora as a collective expression of the spirit of African people. Another example of African new religious movements is the RastafarI movement which, like the Nija movement, idealizes Africa (specifically Ethiopia) and allegiance to Haile Selassie I, the liberator, as the impetus of its political, cultural and racial justice. RastafarI insists on the recovery of African history, and reaffirms the significance of the *negro* consciousness in the image of a new African Deity (the living God, Jah). Indeed, the Rastas' resistance to oppression is significant and transformative for two reasons: first, they move to re-generate the cultural independence of the subjugated; second, in their cultural and political activities they want to occupy an important place in the emancipation of all subalterns. RastafarI is Afrocentric because it is in search of Ethiopia, and 'the creation of new independent people, a new philosophy of decolonisation’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Afrocentricity is also visible in other contemporary movements such the Afro-Brazilian Quimbanda magic movement, Santeria, Candomble, Yoruba and Obeah. These movements recognise the importance of the historical and spiritual experience of Africa through African symbols and spirit guides (ancestors) which govern the physical and spiritual world. According to the Quimbanda movement, which is monotheistic and practiced in Brazil (where there are over 65,000 temples at the present time) and elsewhere in the world, there are seventy two astral spirits (*Nkisi,* which are good and evil) and three deities (known as the Quimbanda Trinity, composed of Exu Maioral, Exu Rei and Maria Padilla Rein) to venerate and one Supreme God (Nzambi, the Almighty God of the Great Celestial Mysteries and Creator of the world ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’) to worship.[[12]](#footnote-12)

African new religious movements tend to return to the indigenous beliefs and practices of Africa for two reasons. Firstly, African identity is a revolutionary strategy which resists the dominant religions, and is a necessity in response to increasing westernization. Secondly, members of the movements preserve their African heritage, pantheons of Gods, deities and spirits.

**Conclusion**

The work of the African new religious movements and spiritualities is to bring Africa to light as the sign of a new *Rinascimento* (renaissance) and liberation for the poor. For Africans, the centrality of African symbols, values, and ethics prevails, and such an African heritage reflects the new dynamic of resistance, revolution and liberation from the hegemonic attitudes of Europe.

1. John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. H. W. Turner, ‘A Typology for African Religious Movements’ in  *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 1967, 1(1):17; essay reprinted in H. W. Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1979), pp. 79-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, ‘Indigenous African Christian Churches: Signs of Authenticity’, in *African Theology en Route Kofi*, Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity,* 79. [Text as original] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*,83. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change,* (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity,* 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the glossary in Nathalie S. Murrell, William David Spencer et al., in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Philadelphia, USA: Temple University Press, 1998), 448. Decolonisation philosophy is defined as one common in the African diaspora that advocates the end of colonialism and thus has a post-colonial nature. It has become part of anthropological, cultural, economic, political, sociological and theological studies in America and it has been influential in social movements such as RastafarI and pan-Africanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Carlos Antonio De Bourbon-Galdiano-Montenegro, *Quimbanda Religion*: *The Secrets of Afro-Brazilian Magic Spells and Rituals*, (Los Angeles, Ca: American Candomble Church Pubblications, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)