

# The African American as African

*Molefi Kete Asante*

## Who am I?

One day a newly hatched eagle fell from its mother's clutches as she was flying over a chicken yard. The young eagle grew up in the chicken yard with young chickens and took on the habits, customs, and behavior of chickens. He ate like a chicken, walked like a chicken, and generally performed his daily routine like the birds who surrounded him. One day an eagle flew over the chicken yard, perhaps a parent eagle, looking for the lost eagle. Perched high on a tree's limb over-looking the chicken yard, the eagle saw the young eagle that had fallen out of its mother's clutches. The old eagle called to the young eagle, "Eagle, can you hear me?" The young eagle thought of himself as a chicken and did not respond to the call of the eagle in the tree. However, the old eagle continued to call out to him, "Eagle down there, hello." Finally the eagle in the chicken yard thought, can that eagle in the tree be yelling to me? So he looked up at the tree and saw that the old eagle was beckoning to him to fly up to the tree's branch. The young eagle said, "I cannot fly. I am a chicken." Insisting that he try to fly the old eagle said, "No, you are not a chicken you are an eagle and I know your parents, in fact, I am your mother and your father is waiting for me to bring you."

Africans in the Americas have always faced a rather difficult identity problem, largely because of how we came to be domiciled in the Americas in such large numbers. The displacement of Africans from the African continent to the Americas was not a voluntary act. No African decided to move to the Americas as a matter of course. There were no political, cultural, or commercial imperatives that would have called for the voluntary migration of Africans. Neither religious persecution or political exploitation would have

created the great overseas migration of millions of African people. Our presence in America is therefore unlike that of any other people who have come to the Americas in the modern era.

## **Assaulting African Identity**

This essay briefly addresses some of the anxieties surrounding identity, explicates the quest for individuation in the presence of psychological conflict, and analyzes the discourse surrounding the identity issue. One might simply begin with the fact that the African in the United States was not a citizen of the United States until after 1865. One sees almost immediately how easy it is to problematize the identity question at the beginning of the history of one of the American nations. Thus, the relentless assault on the African's identity was initiated from the very beginning of our presence in the Americas.

I believe that issues of identity that have emerged in the twentieth century have their roots in events that occurred in the fifteenth century. African people in the Western world cannot be thought of without thinking of white people, European people, who, in their many interactions with Africans, are responsible for the present turmoil. Clearly there is a difference between what Europeans did in Europe and what they did in the Americas, and I do not want to imply that Europeans and white South or North Americans are now of the same mind. However, it is true that white Americans are an extension of Europe and many of the attitudes and behaviors of white Americans in terms of African identity are rooted in the philosophies of Europe.

Nevertheless neither is Africa blameless because to have been vulnerable is the first crime committed against the masses of Africans. And the roots of African vulnerability grew out of the same eras as those of European confidence. The death of Emperor Sunni Ali Ber of Songhay in 1492 led to numerous imperial political instabilities and the subsequent disintegration of the centuries old Ghana-Mali-Songhay Complex, which unfortunately coincided with the rapid rise of European expansionism in the Americas and in Africa. With the breakdown of the major West-

African, empire the entire western flank of the continent lay open to European aggression as the northern and eastern flanks had been accessible to Arab aggression years earlier. Seizing the opportunity to penetrate the African interior in search, at first, for gold, then for humans, the various European "trading" companies participated in a virtual scramble for Africa's material and human resources. As Europe itself expanded to the Americas, no new world was therefore discovered; the old world was merely transferred to new territories with its beliefs, practices, attitudes that upheld the inferiority of Africans and Native Americans.

Almost every western European nation was involved in the rush to establish trading and slaving footholds in Africa to fuel and people America's colonies. Along with the commercial operations always came interpretative schools, journalists, adventurers, missionaries, various nationalists of one sort or the other whose primary aim was the advancement of their national interest in Africa and the Americas. Thus, from the inception of the conquest European writers have had a stake in how Africans see themselves much more than Africans have been interested in the way whites see themselves. Europe's dictatorship on the nature of African identity has sought to make an amanuensis of the African writer. Europeans have argued and seek to have Africans argue that revisionist histories of Africa are attempts to glorify a never-existing Africa and thus invalidate Europe's claim to having civilized Africans. Of course, the assumption is that the "story" of the African past rendered by the European and white American writers is a valid and unbiased story.

Psychic scarifications exist among Africans and Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean because of this monstrous and brutal historical interaction. Africans in Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Congo, Cameroon, and other nations have suffered psychologically from the dominance of Europe in their minds. In Europe and the Americas, whites have been inflicted with the absurdity of racial superiority over Africans and other people. While the special character of this racial hegemony was essentially a product of western and northern Europeans in the Americas, it became the characteristic of all Europeans; the identities of eastern and southern Europeans entered the mix as dross and came out in America

as gold. This was the transformation of national and ethnic identities into racial identity. European ethnic and national identities became the white identity of the Americas. In effect, being white was of greater value than being Polish, Serbian, Greek, Turkish, Spanish, Irish, or Italian. Defined by Germanic and Scandinavian peoples, whiteness became the core constituent of transformation, and all Europeans, from every corner of Europe, sought this radical transformation based on African and Native American subjugation. They preferred whiteness to their original ethnic and national identities.

In the horrible dragnet of the enslavement, millions of Africans were uprooted and brought to the Americas and Caribbean against our wills. Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa, Mandinka, Congo, Wolof, Asante, Ewe, Ga, Ngola, and one hundred other ethnic groups were brought to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. This diverse people, steeped in specific historical references, shaped by the forces of economics and ethics, religion and society, came to represent the modern African American, another racial or cultural transformation, whether domiciled in the United States, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Canada, Mexico, Panama, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Haiti, Guadeloupe, or hundreds of other venues scattered in the sea. Every nation in the Americas touched by the presence of Africa is unalterably an African nation in some way, having assimilated much of the music, rhythms, intuitions, aesthetic sensibilities, wit and humor, logic and eloquence, love of nature, and optimism that often represent the African people. Consequently any discussion of identity must necessarily involve the dynamic cultural contributions of Africa to the Americas and the informal and formal interaction of Africans with the indigenous Americans who added a considerable genetic component to the African population.

## **The Legacy of Enslavement and Colonialism**

Yet as far as we have come, we have not succeeded in overcoming the immense backdrop of discrimination erected to fortify the institutions of our ancestors' enslavement in the Americas. The

multiple layers of lies and distortions that have been generated around Africa have smothered the psychological life of many African people on and off of the continent. Therefore, our thoughts of Africa or ourselves are not projected in a vacuum; the ideas about Africa held by the West are not constructed in innocence. They are derived from a long American and European tradition of advancing white racial supremacy in the world whether in discussions of art, history, architecture, language, or the concept of beauty. In my own analysis the ideas of the racist thinkers have become, too often, the popular ideas of the white masses and often the ideas of the victims. For example:

David Hume in 1748 wrote: "I am apt to suspect that the Negroes in general are naturally inferior to whites. There has never been a civilized nation of any other complexion than white."

George Curvier, the Aristotle of his age, the founder of geology, paleontology, and comparative anatomy, wrote in 1812 that the "African is the most degraded of human races and whose form approaches that of the beast and whose intelligence is no where great enough to arrive at regular governance."

Georg Hegel, the greatest European thinker of his century, wrote in 1828: "Let us forget Africa never to return to it for Africa is no part of the historical globe, it is outside of history."

Thomas Jefferson, the first major American political philosopher, wrote in his notes on Virginia in 1790: "I advance it therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind."

Arnold Toynbee, the English historian, wrote that "[o]f the twenty-one great civilizations of the world, not one has been produced in Africa."

Winston Churchill's biographer Andrew Roberts claims that Churchill was an out-and-out racist even by the standards of his own times. From his perceived position of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy, "he looked down with disdain upon Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Italians, and other inferior races." In fact, according to Roberts when he went to the movies to see the African American version of the opera by Bizet, "Carmen Jones," he walked out because he did not like "blackamoors."

## The Continuity of Africa

There is an optimism in the voices of those of us who are the children of the ones who refused to die in the *maafa*, the great disaster, of enslavement. Integral to the creation of the system of capture, transport, and enslavement of Africans was the denial of our identity. How could human beings, particularly those who had gone through the Enlightenment, stoop to enslave other human beings? Of course the answer to this question was profoundly historical and philosophical in the development of Europe's thinking about Africans. For the most part, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Africans, whose DNA we now know flow in all human veins, were not considered a part of the human world as defined by Europeans. Beginning with the Renaissance and encompassing the Enlightenment, which hardly illuminated transcultural social values, Europe found it necessary to offer justifications for the brutal enslavement of Africans. Whether because of Christianity or some other ideological posture, the results of this reassessment of Africa, as opposed to earlier European encounters with the continent, amounted to an assault on the identity of Africans by the most authoritative of European scholars, from Hegel to Toynbee.

However, despite the rampant assaults against Africa's history, its diaspora and culture, there was nothing in the social and cultural experiences of Africans in the West that did not speak of an African identity, even if it was a suppressed identity or one under duress. Yet while African was written in our cuisine, in our art, in our music and dance, in our conversations, it was true, as James Baldwin had written in *Stranger in the Village*, that we could not trace our ancestry beyond a few generations and this has produced not just an identity anxiety within us, but an intolerable anxiety in the former white masters who must carry around the Christian guilt of what their ancestors did to Africans and Native Americans. In the face of this assault against history and culture, Africa emerges in every generation in the Americas in more expressive and vital forms.

## **Postmodernism and the Sins of Confusion**

A considerable confusion now surrounds the identity of the African in the Americas. In many respects even today this is an issue of the continuing influence of Europe in our minds. Numerous writers have pointed out that inquiry into identity will produce an array of complex problems. Others have tried to interrogate the various transformations of identity in their works noting transgenerational and transcultural issues of identity as well as various other social and economic modalities of place and position. What fascinates me is that this discussion is centered in the universities when at ground level the entire debate seems meaningless from an economic or social perspective.

It remains true, for example, in the United States that the prison population is made up of more than 50 percent African American males although they comprise less than 7 percent of the general population. The fact is that more than 65 percent of all school children placed in Special Education Classes are African American children. Even in times of an expanding economy when the unemployment rate for the general American population is less than 6 percent, the rate for African Americans is 16 percent.

Among those who claim that there is no African American, there are those that say that there exists no monolithic African American, only a hypothetical African American. So "mixed" is the population from a genetic point of view and so "mixed" is it from a social point of view and so "mixed" is it from an intellectual and cultural point of view, they argue, that it is difficult to speak of an African American monolith. But no one has ever spoken of an African American monolith. What all our writers and scientists have claimed is that the population whose ancestry came to the Americas in chains has suffered fundamental cultural and psychological problems based on an identity crisis. Obviously the crisis is different for some than for others as there are diverse ways of responding to such existential situations. One can encounter those who say that they are neither African nor American, and those who are more European than African, and then those who are more African than European, and others who say that despite their genetic mixture they are still African. However,

the United States, for example, is not sophisticated enough as a nation to figure out such academic issues; it remains true that those who participate in African culture or who have African ancestors are considered black in the United States, while such may not be the case in Brazil.

What does it mean to say "African" in this context anyway? After all we are domiciled in the West although our origins are African. But we are Africans primarily because of the epic memory of historical and social factors that constituted us as a people acting and acted upon in ways different from the experiences of other people. In Brazil we formed the Palmares Republic and followed Zumbi in the hills to create quilombismos against the Portuguese. In Jamaica we fought with Nanny against the British. In St. Croix we demanded that the Danish end the enslavement of Africans. In Mexico we revolted under the leadership of Yanga and established our own free zone. In the United States Nat Turner took up weapons against the plantation system. These and a thousand other heroic acts of Africans in the Americas have helped to mold an attitude of resistance against sustained physical and legal harassment. What does it mean to be African in the West? It means that our forced insertion into the Western body politic by Europe's descendants created an African who was displaced physically but never spiritually, and consequently the drums, long outlawed in the United States, have returned as if they had not been banned for more three hundred and fifty years. Yet we know that the percussive sense and spirit never left the Africans in the United States.

The central dissonancing and distancing myth of the African's presence in the West is that there is no African culture. In fact, the conflict and confusion in the African's quest for identity in the West is related to the cynical intrusion of European racism into the presentation of African reality. This penetration into the consciousness of African identity started with the denial of the presence of African culture in the West. Of course, the denial was a lie even as the truth was being lived out in the lives of our people. In other words, Africans in the Americas were manifesting Africanity while not necessarily understanding that it was Africanity. From music to work, from religious expression to language, from food to fashion, we were African but many of us denied that our



rhythms were African. This is the dilemma created by the intervention of a European ideology that denies the existence of African culture. In fact, more than a simple intervention, European ideology was deliberately destructive toward African mental liberation as it insisted that Africa was backward, heathen, primitive, and pagan. It meant that even as Africans practiced African culture, we would deny its presence in our lives. After all, who would want to be an African given such incredibly bad press.

### **The Rise of the Afrocentric Idea**

The media of oppression was the central factor in this distortion, and one could not (cannot not now) claim that such powerful images of media could be overcome by a people who did not control the information about our origins or our identity. We had hundreds of years of historical amnesia, ignorance enforced by law, and fear dictated by custom with which to struggle. Once a people's agency has been taken away from them it takes constant attention to consciousness to regain it. A new school of thought around the Temple University Circle of Afrocentricity began a few years ago to explore the meaning of African agency in a variety of subject fields. What began with the publication of several books, *Afrocentricity*, and *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, and *The Afrocentric Idea*, has now become an international intellectual movement sustained by the work of numerous scholars. Although finding its source in the African-American scholars' writings, the Afrocentric School is joined by Jamaican, Brazilian, Chinese, Japanese, German, British, Turkish, Haitian, Nigerian, Senegalese, South African, and Dutch scholars who form a strong chapter in the coming future of human interaction because they understand the necessity for pluralism without hierarchy, one of the cardinal principles of Afrocentricity, the theory of viewing and interpreting Africans as agents rather than as periphery to Europe.

Several other transformations have occurred that portend a different and more positive future. In the first place, the breakup of the Soviet Union impacted on the question of ethnic identity more than anything in the past one hundred years. Second, the multi-

plicity of African nations seeking to understand the African diaspora, and third, the increasingly plural American society, have created opportunities for understanding and collaboration. With the emergence of ethnic populations in the former Soviet Union, there is an increasing awareness of the legitimate rights of people as communities of similar values, interests, and identities. What the African Americans can demonstrate is that the possibility of finding one's sense of place within a plural society does not have to destroy identity. The fact that this has happened in many instances in the West is directly linked to the issues of the Soviet Union. You cannot force everyone to be Russian or English; they may speak the language but they will harbor feelings of resentment if they feel forced to accept an ethnicity that is not historical and maybe even be in opposition to their own.

Africa itself has awakened to the potential of its ethnic diaspora, which promises a greater future for Africa in a material way but also demonstrates that distance and time are mere trivialities of history in the re-establishment of relations. Yanga of Mexico, Zumbi of Brazil, Boukman of Haiti, and Nanny of Jamaica share a similar glory to Nat Turner of the United States in the annals of the rising of oppressed people, and they are all furthermore connected in similar historical ways to the many resisters of enslavement, colonization, and exploitation on the African continent itself. This awakening consciousness on the part of Africa is not a mere biological dynamic but rather a serious attachment to the historical realities that have confronted the African peoples.

There are numerous dangers confronting the African identity in the West not the least of which is the full flight of some African intellectuals, particularly those of mixed cultural heritage, toward a rapprochement with white triumphalism. Leading this school of thought is the writer Kwame Anthony Appiah whose major work *In My Father's House* is sweepingly replete with worn out stereotypes of Africa and the African diaspora, indicating that the writer is extremely familiar with all the wrinkles on the African fabric, but unfortunately does not know what to make of them except to offer Africa and its peoples as the "other" in the Western imagination.

Appiah seeks to provide a comprehensive statement about the role of African culture and identity in the postmodern world. He

uses himself as a case in point. His mother is English and his father was Asante from Ghana. He seeks to speak to the West about the nature of Africa and African people and in moving his center to the Western audience loses sight of his footing. The failure therefore of Appiah's project is its deliberate attempt to cast the West in the position of dominance and his father's culture, the African, in the role of inferior. What is clear in his book is the fact that the patrilineal concept of family is privileged over the matrilineal concept. While he attempts to assert an Asante identity he engages his issues, whether family decisions, identity formation, or personhood in the language and culture of Europe. He remains, after all, despite his useful critical insights on postcolonialism, a Eurocentrist. I am not necessarily decrying that fact except to say that it is an important fact when one understands that Appiah seeks a patrilineal Asante identity in places where one cannot be found in such a profoundly matrilineal society.

Despite the persistent travails of the centuries, the twists and turns in the road to agency, Africans in the Americas are clearly headed in the right direction for sanity. And though we never had, after the various emancipations of enslaved persons in different American nations, a collective therapy session to straighten out our heads, that is, to remove the chicken image from our minds, we have been fortunate to inherit a trust in our instincts, a belief in dignity, a compassion for the suffering, and the ability to keep an eagle's eye on the African compass, not in the sense of some romantic vision of Africa or some exotic biological determinism but in the deliberate historical appreciation of the role of our ancestors in maintaining in their souls the knowledge of our continent of origin.

## ARTICLE SYNOPSIS IN EBONICS

Dis wut I rite saes dat duh Afrikan n de America luk lik anu bodacious dition of Afrika. Lookshere, de stan duh ahtur done tuk be dat no Afrikan slave wuz brung heuh. But dis heuh saes dem Afrikan wuz rooted up n brung tuh de America n den made slave. Dis wut I rite sho nuff sho dat duh Afrikan n America done be tached by culture tuh pleni Afrikan settlement, comin anu, sproutin Afrikan people wid dey own mojo, storie, n all dat jazz.

## ARTICLE SYNOPSIS IN TWI

Krataa yi gye to mu se Abibifoo a wowo Amerika aman so no gyina ho ma Abibirem amanee foforo bi. Kaseebo a otwerefuo yi afa ne se, nkorofuo amfa Abibirem nnonkofuo biara amfiri Abibiman mu amma Amerika aman so. Otwerefuo yi adwidwa mu aka se, dee ewo mu ne se; nkorofuo kokyeree Abibifoo dommum na wosoa wonde won baa Amerika amna so bedanee won nnonkofuo. Krataa yi ko so kyerekyere mu pefee se Abibifoo a wowo Amerika aman so no ne aman ahadoo a ewo Abibiman mu no di nsawosoo wo amammere kwan so; na saa Abibifoo foforo a wowo amannonne yi abeye Abibiman nnipa bi a won nneyeee, won abakosem, ne won amanee ye sononko.