

Dani Nabudere's Afrikology

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Dani Nabudere's Afrikology

A Quest for African Holism

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Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
DAKAR

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Preface

Dani Wadada Nabudere, the illustrious Ugandan scholar who passed away in 2011, produced a diverse body of work on various aspects of African culture, politics, and philosophy. Toward the end of his life, he formulated a theoretical construct that he termed “Afrikology.” Unlike most other Afrocentrists, who have stopped with the task of proving the primacy of the Egyptian past and its numerous cultural and scientific achievements, Nabudere strenuously attempts to connect that illustrious heritage with the African present. This, remarkably, is what makes his project worthy of careful attention.

Essentially, Nabudere’s philosophy of Afrikology traces the historical, cultural, scientific, and social links between the “Cradle of Humankind” and the contemporary world, with a view to healing the seismic severances occasioned by violence, false thinking, war, loss, and dispossession in order to accomplish an epistemological and psychic sense of wholeness for an African collective self. Before then, he worked extensively on different issues in African politics, most especially his trenchant critiques of imperialism. Now is a suitable time to begin to critically examine his various intellectual formulations with a view to situating his work properly within the apposite traditions of African scholarship.

This study takes on the urgently required task of evaluating Nabudere’s location and contributions as an eminent African scholar. First of all, his formulations on politics and African philosophy are examined. This work also juxtaposes his corpus with primarily those of Cheikh Anta Diop and Molefi Kete Asante, whose corpora in many ways influence and intersect with Nabudere’s work, in order to isolate recurrent trends in contemporary Africana thought and the influence of their legacies. This aspect of the project, hopefully, seeks to deepen the theoretical range of the book. In other words, it brings Nabudere’s work into conversation with his Africanist peers to better underline his singularity as a thinker and theorist, even if he is one who, as this work will show, leaves much to be desired. Finally, the work of the Dutch anthropologist, Wim M. J. van Binsbergen is examined as it intersects with many of Nabudere’s preoccupations.

It needs to be emphasized that this book is not merely a paean to Nabudere. Instead, it stands, hopefully, as a critical point of reference on his oeuvre. As such, this study provides a critical analysis of Nabudere’s contributions to the

broad field of African scholarship and of his stature in the discipline of African studies. His corpus is multidisciplinary, although a major preoccupation with Africa is discernible in virtually all his works. His writings deal with critiques of imperialism, African political systems, processes of globalization and Africa's location within them, and finally the ideological and existential imperatives of Afrocentric discourse. Toward the final segment of his career, he was solely preoccupied with Afrikology, which marks a major advance in his development as a conceptual thinker.

Finally, the study critiques the concept of Afrikology with a view to unearthing its full epistemological value. Before embarking on the concept, Nabudere's work on the African condition was characterized by a presentism that sometimes bordered on journalism. The exploration of Afrikology signified a transition to protohistory and hence, more proper academic discourse. Nonetheless, both approaches have their advantages. Presentism represents a populist immediacy, while Afrikology grants a degree of respectability and scholarly legitimacy. Protohistory, as it relates to Africa, is a more comforting discourse, since its distance prevents unwanted scrutiny. The distance also provides an opportunity for historical reinvention, which presentism cannot readily offer. As for theory, protohistory is also more amenable. Contemporary Africa can no longer blame its woes on colonialism and apartheid. It no longer has a blank canvas upon which to inscribe its failures that now appear to emanate directly from it. It has instead become a self-invented gargoyle that must speak for itself, unlike in the past when it allowed its foes to speak on its behalf. The present speaks in a myriad of unknown tongues, which is why it becomes difficult to find the connections between the past, what lies between, and the future. That is the level of responsibility involved in presentist analysis that, under protohistory, is not evident.

Nabudere's work prior to his elucidation of the concept of Afrikology can be characterized as an absence of theory or, at best, half-hearted forays in search of a theory. Africa, as we know, was the center of his concerns; i.e., Africa, in spite of its remarkable past, as victim of a brutal and persisting (post)colonial order. However, with the conceptualization of Afrikology, Nabudere finally came into his own; a voice discovered or, more appropriately, rekindled in the scalding ashes of postcolonial critique and the reoccurring realities of postcolonial malaise. But how forceful and original is his voice?

Nabudere quietly appropriated the projects of Afrocentricity such as those of Diop and Asante without due engagement with their particulars. So, rather than merely examining his voice in its isolated singularity, it is more representative to establish it within a discursive continuum to which both Diop and Asante belong. Nabudere's project is not original, even though, from an Afrocentric perspective, it is significant. But analytically, both its significance and failures can be interrogated when situated in an intellectual and historical context that addresses the same

issues he seeks to problematize. Even if Nabudere's problematizations had not gone beyond those of the original Afrocentrists, it would still have been necessary to engage them as he often attempts to present his project as an isolated totality unconnected with other similar work or traditions. This approach ends up in a conceptual incongruity requiring urgent attention.

In addition to Diop and Asante, it is necessary to read Nabudere's work alongside the discourse of protohistory – hence the inclusion of Van Binsbergen's interventions. A central claim of Afrikology is that Africa is the Cradle of Humankind. This large claim requires substantiation with knowledge in the fields of comparative linguistics, comparative mythology, archaeology, anthropology, and genetics. Nabudere does not demonstrate the kind of awareness that fully addresses, or at least, incorporates this vital methodological imperative. Diop, on the other hand, is more aware of the significance of this methodological necessity and sets out to address it with the required seriousness.

Asante, to some degree, recognizes the importance of rigorous methodology in projects of Afrocentric intent. But his contributions to the discourse are of a different nature. The Atlantic slave trade had highly transformative and profound effects. It created new worlds, new beings, and new civilizations. What were supposed to be vast literal deathscapes ended up producing forms of life and creativity that attest to the ingenuity and creativity of the black race. Slavery was not meant to be regenerative in the ordinary sense of the word. It was meant, instead, to enforce a conception of work that divorced the worker (in this case, the slave) from it (work); it sought to implement a notion of work that signified utter sterility and spiritless abjection in which, by a paradoxical movement, it was able to produce death on a mass scale as its reoccurring signature. Asante understands the devastation wrought by slavery but more importantly, he comprehends that in its unremitting dynamic to establish sterility and regression as the black subjects' essential condition, it ended up transposing them into realms of unanticipated liberty. This liberation was not merely of the physical kind. In fact, this, at this stage, is less important, as the profundity of this liberation was the sort that enabled death to erupt with life, laughter, and song in a miracle of creation. Death, in effect, was compelled to birth precisely what it was not meant to; a freedom that liberated the slave beyond the reach and power of the slave master.

It seems impossible for Afrocentricity to compose itself without its mirror: Eurocentrism. Afrocentricity, just as other philosophies of blackness before it – *négritude* and African personality – requires its conceptual twin to breathe, and without which, it would appear difficult to sustain an independent existence of its own. Afrocentricity is aware of the numerous feints and deceptions of Eurocentrism because every time the demise of the latter and racism are proclaimed, a fresh assault is made upon the heart of former. Eurocentrism and Afrocentricity often act as conjoined twins with Eurocentrism serving as a

dagger that shadows every move of its conceptual twin. But even more than this cloak and dagger relationship, Afrocentricity continually celebrates its freedom and remains resolutely close to the rhythms of joy and catharsis in contrast to the immensity, solitude, and relentlessness of the dialectic. The dialectic, totally devoid of spirituality, prefers the awful, comfortless reality of its devastation; infinity becomes far more terrifying than immortality: it becomes a nightmare for which there can never be some respite. Afrocentricity, having avoided this sterile, endlessly repetitive future, re-establishes a connection that collapses the distinction between heart and intellect even though it would forever remain an anomalous juxtaposition.

One of Afrocentricity's most remarkable hallmarks is its ability to wrest joy from the clutches of death and to identify how liberation is actually an opportunity to mourn. This goes against the tenets of conventional philosophy, which would rather endure as an activity that finds a reason to repeat itself ad nauseam. In other words, Afrocentricity refuses to be a philosophy of joylessness that, in the face of the overwhelming dominance of the dialectic constitutes an affront to philosophy, not within its centre but at its murky, disavowed margins. Afrocentricity sprang from death, a luscious experience of death, a death that demanded that its victims dance and sing as they yielded sacrificial offerings of blood, tears, and semen to it even as it still was not appeased. Afrocentricity rose from a gluttonous death and as a sign of triumph over it, Afrocentricity had to wrest laughter that continually rings from the bitterest parts of the heart. Otherwise, it would remain a perpetual, inconsolable slave to it (death). If the dialectic had become the sole momentum of philosophy, death had threatened to be Afrocentricity's permanent condition and feature. However, Afrocentricity has been able to effect a complete refusal of this proposition and hence philosophy's unyielding hostility toward it.

Furthermore, if Eurocentrism is Afrocentricity's conceptual twin, the relationship, curiously, is marked by a great distance, by a total lack of communication, in which the same conflicts between the two are endlessly reshaped without the ultimate confrontation that could lead to a resolution.

This work prepares the stage for a much-needed conversation across the meaningless conflicts that refuse to generate mutual understanding. The refusal or inability of Afrocentricity and Eurocentrism to understand each other is quite striking. This work is not primarily about effecting an alteration of this state of affairs – even as it provides what ought to be worthwhile source of contemplation – but an effort to engineer a juxtaposition that demonstrates why the misunderstandings occur so frequently. The misunderstandings stem from both Afrocentricity and Eurocentrism pursuing different aims and interests that are often unrelated even when they address similar concerns. Such aims and interests are never aligned to engender mutual understanding.

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