



Molefi Kete Asante: The Afrocentric Idea and the cultural turn in intercultural communication studies

Reynaldo Anderson

Harris Stowe State University, 3026 Laclede Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63103, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Molefi Kete Asante
Transracial communication
Intercultural communication
Mass communication
Rhetoric
Africology
Afrocentricity

ABSTRACT

Molefi Kete Asante is one of the most important scholars in the field of communication studies in the late twentieth century. His general interests range from intercultural communication, rhetoric, media and public communication to Africana studies. He has taught at several universities, led several organizations and is recognized as a leader within the communication discipline and in the broader national and global society; especially within Africa and the African diaspora. Asante is credited with the development and eventual emergence of what is referred to as the Afrocentric Idea, a theoretical perspective focusing on the agency of African peoples. Asante's groundbreaking work in the 1970s and 1980s would foreshadow and frame many of the debates of not only communication studies, but in the fields of education, sociology, literary, and cultural studies, as well as history from the 1990s and early twenty first century. The current article focuses on Asante's important contributions to intercultural communication in the areas of rhetoric, media and public communication, Africana Studies, and intercultural/interracial communication. Asante's emergence corresponded with the American multiracial struggle against domestic racism and segregation; and the international fight against imperialism and advanced stages of colonialism. Many of Asante's ideas reflect the spirit of the 1955 Bandung conference that helped launch intellectual and political opposition to oppression by people of color.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

As one of the most important contributors to the field of communication studies during the late 20th century, Molefi Kete Asante's emergence corresponded with the American multiracial struggle against domestic racism and segregation; and the international fight against imperialism and advanced stages of colonialism. Many of Asante's ideas resonate with the spirit of the 1955 Bandung conference, an international gathering of national movements and colonial states that crystallized the intellectual and political opposition to oppression by people of color (Prashad, 2007). Therefore the genesis of Asante's work is grounded in the historical context of the African American freedom and anti-colonial movements between 1955 and the mid 1970s. He is credited as being the founder of the Afrocentric school of thought in communication studies. Among his many accomplishments was serving as the first president of SIETAR International, the International Society of Intercultural Education, Training, and Research. Asante has had an international impact with his work.

Tina Harris notes:

As the father and esteemed theorist of Afrocentricity, Molefi Kete Asante is indeed a living legend in the communication and Africana Studies disciplines. The longevity of his career is the epitome of what constitutes a true scholar. His astoundingly prolific publication record of books, essays, and journal articles in leading publication outlets is

E-mail address: reysand@swbell.net

a testament to the ubiquitous influence his scholarship has had in foregrounding the reality of marginality. More specifically, Professor Asante is hailed as the forerunner in advancing communication scholarship on the centrality of African identity in theory and methodology related to our understanding of self (read otherness) in a world where race, culture, and ethnicity remain salient. (Personal correspondence, 2011)

Arthur Lee Smith, Jr., currently known as Molefe Kete Asante, was born August 14, 1942 in Valdosta, Georgia. Following his matriculation at the Nashville Christian Institute, Asante received an Associate of Arts degree at Southwestern Christian College and later graduated with a bachelor's degree from Oklahoma Christian College (Jackson & Brown-Givens, 2006). Asante received a scholarship to attend graduate school at Pepperdine University where he was mentored by Fred L. Casmir, a founder of the academic study of intercultural communication and then nationally known for his work in the research area of persuasion. The exposure to various dimensions of communication studies in the areas of argumentation, social influence, and public communication strategies influenced him to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) (Jackson & Brown-Givens, 2006).

During his program two major scholars influenced his development, Charles Lomas and Maulana Karenga. Lomas was a specialist in revolutionary rhetoric and exposed Asante to advanced rhetorical theory and praxis, and Maulana Karenga, founder of Kwanza and developer of the Kawaia theory, demonstrated the relationship between Eurocentric dominance and the concession by African Americans of their own agency (Jackson, 2003b). In addition, Asante learned African and African American history from Boniface Obichere, Gary Nash, and Ronald Takaki (Asante, 2011). This phase of his development during the mid to late 1960's, paralleling the American Civil Rights and Black Power/Revolution, the Cold War, and Vietnam War, led him to develop the early formulations of what would later be called Afrocentricity.

In relation to his activities with SIETAR, Asante notes:

The founding of the Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research occurred during a time of deep social change in the world. I did not conceive the idea; I was an activist who helped to implement it and therefore was elected the first president of the organization. SIETAR remains one of the purest movements toward a collective appreciation of the value of each human being that I know. It piggy-backed in many ways on the African American rise to consciousness, the anti-war campaigns, and the beginning of the Women's Movement. Fundamentally, it was about culture, overcoming differences in culture, and asserting a new world consciousness of cultural complementarities" (Personal correspondence, 2011).

Asante's goal of seeking location and agency in relation to African peoples and other cultures influenced his communication research agenda in the areas of rhetoric, media and interracial communication.

2. Rhetoric: linking speech to intercultural communication

Historically, the field of rhetoric had an important role in the development of intercultural communication. Asante's most significant early work was in rhetoric and examined the cultural influences on discourse. Previously the field of rhetoric was primarily devoted to the exegesis of western or European modes of discourse. For example, Ehninger (1968) asserted that there were three systems or bodies of rhetoric including; the classical period from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. consisting of the intellectual contributions of the Greeks and Romans, the British and continental period from 1550 to 1830, and the contemporary era extending from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1960s. An example of the then contemporary perspective in the 1960s in relation to the study of rhetoric in the context of the social movements of the time was the position adopted by Lloyd Bitzer. Bitzer argued that the context out of which a rhetor speaks creates discourse and therefore occurs in a "natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence that evokes an utterance" (Bitzer, 1968, in Asante, 1987, p. 29).

However, as Asante would later argue, while the types of propositions may yield insight into a rhetor's or philosopher's linguistic perspective, it does not necessarily get a scholarly observer "closer to the question of the overarching condition of discourse in the African American or African context" (Asante, 1987, p. 29). Historically, studies of rhetoric and social movements had been restricted to a macro perspective examining strategic themes or the texts of individual speeches vis-à-vis local movements. Still, by the 1960s with the emergence of the modern civil rights movement, and anti-colonial struggles the field of rhetoric experienced a period of re-assessment and change. According to Asante:

This book, *The Rhetoric of Black Revolution* [Smith, 1969], was the first book to examine the varieties of African American responses to oppressive situations. Grounded in the everyday actions of movement rhetoric the book attempted to explain and project the symbols and signs of resistance and resilience that emanated from a people that had finally found their footing. (Personal correspondence, 2011)

For example, Asante noted in that work (Smith, 1969) that assimilation, separatism, and revolution are the themes that constitute a distinctive Black rhetoric. Black social movements in America have generally three ideological traditions, integration or liberal pluralism, Black Nationalism, and Black radicalism. For example, the Black Panther Party was part of the Black radical tradition and culturally and historically descended from the Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, and Denmark Vesey slave rebellions of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth-century Black radical movements such as the African Blood Brotherhood. Assimilation rhetoric calls for the eventual integration of African Americans into American society. Examples

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947168>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/947168>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)