

# How Culture and History Shape Rhetorical Ideas: African Rhetoric Within the Western World

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## Abstract

“How Culture and History Shape Rhetorical Ideas: African Rhetoric Within the Western World” is a thesis contending for the significance of African rhetoric. Specifically, it assesses the differences and functionality of African rhetoric beyond Western-European constructs. It does this through analyzing the culture and history of Africans and African Americans, and demonstrates how it affects the construction of rhetoric in comparison to the West. The shift in perspective is crucial to understanding how culture and history shape rhetorical realms. Maulana Karenga and Molefi Asante are two important historical figures in the world of both Western and African rhetoric. Here they are used as prime examples for what African rhetoric is, what it represents, and the consistent nature of African rhetoric despite dynamic factors; such as changes in time, geography, and cultural events. By dissecting the rhetorical structure of African rhetoric in relation to history and culture, it is determined that the origin of any discourse is in fact culturally centered, thus the perspective and rhetorical strategy is culturally centered. Through further examination, it is seen why African rhetoric is structured as it is, why its role is as it is in the Western world, and how an imbalance in perspective impacts the mind and rhetoric.

In many ways, African rhetoric is vastly different from its European counterparts. The structure of these rhetorical ideas can be similar, but it is the purpose of and the vehicle through which the ideas are presented that remain different. In America, for example, conflicting thoughts on rhetoric still exist despite the likeness of geographical location and nationality. This can be attributed to rhetorical ideas being shaped by the people, their culture, and

history. In the case of African descendants, African rhetoric has most notably kept its ethical approach due to the continuous states of oppression that it fights against. In contrast, Western rhetoric includes a history of people who do not face trials like the ones of those of African descent or other minorities. Thus, Western rhetoric does not concern itself with the ethical side of rhetoric as heavily. Maulana Karenga is one philosopher who defined the role of rhetoric within an African context and its purpose in relation to a Western-European construct. Karenga's construction of rhetoric has been similarly articulated through other prominent figures such as Molefi Asante who extends these ideologies to further the liberation of African people.

Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga is an activist-scholar dedicated to liberating the Black community and achieving equality for all people. Karenga studied at Los Angeles City College and the University of California, Los Angeles. He was an activist partaking in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He is also the creator of Kwanzaa, a holiday promoting African traditions of "First Fruit" and the seven principles of African heritage. Karenga is also a co-founder of the Black nationalist group US Organization with Hakim Jamal and was a member of Congress of Racial Equality and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He is currently best known as an American professor of Africana studies, an activist, and an author of several books surrounding Pan-Africanism and ethics.

Of his work, Karenga is most notably accredited for the Kawaida philosophy and his argument for African rhetoric. All of his ideals are derived of African culture and have influenced the way rhetoric is used in the African sense according to Karenga. The book *Understanding African American Rhetoric*, specifically Karenga's chapter "Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice," expands on his stance. The chapter first dives into Karenga's argument for African rhetoric, which he defines as: "Communal deliberation, discourse, and action oriented toward that which is good for the community and the world" (Karenga 3).

Karenga introduced a construct of Pan-African values articulated in his doctrine of Kawaida, a system to promote self-awareness and build political consciousness through adherence to a Black value system. There are seven fundamental principles of the system which are kept in the Nguzo Saba. The principles are: Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamma (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose); Kuumba (creativity); and Imani (Faith). Karenga describes Kawaida as "an ongoing synthesis of the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world and is directed toward the enduring historical project of maximum human freedom and flourishing times" (Karenga 13). The Kawaida doctrine is the crux of what makes up Karenga's ideology on African rhetoric. It serves as the focus of African rhetoric which is to use what Africa has to offer to improve the human condition.

Another point African rhetoric expert Karenga refers to is Nommo, the

creative word for the life force. Nommo is “the completion of the perfect series, symbol of the total union of male and female, that is to say of unity, unity of a spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything, and since man has power over the word, it is he who directs the life force. Through the word he receives it, shares it with other beings, and so fulfills the meaning of life” (Karenga 13). Most importantly, it reflects efforts to recover and reconstruct African culture, using the past as a foundation and framework for present and future projects. It is the medium through which material reorganization occurs. To engage in rhetoric as an African is to enter an ancient and ongoing tradition of communicative practice that reaffirms the creative power of the word and its origins in the world’s historical community and culture. The oratory nature of African rhetoric is the start of the steps towards progression. This is what provides the foundation and framework for self-understanding and self-assertion in the world.

Lastly, Medu Nefer is another focal point of African rhetoric. Medu Nefer literally means “good speech.” Medu Nefer refers to how dialog requires respect for all people as fellow participants in the collaborative quest for the common good. It emphasizes the point of speech being morally good as well. African culture sees power in the word, it employs the use of oral communication heavily in the culture and in rhetoric. Karenga stresses how dialog (communal deliberation) is needed in a discourse, with Medu Nefer being the support for a moral resolution. The pillars Karenga presents accent that African rhetoric is one of reaffirmation and emancipative characteristics.

Similar to the formidable Karenga is Molefi Kete Asante, an American professor and philosopher. He is a leading figure in the fields of African American studies, African studies, and communication studies. He is currently a professor in the Department of Africology at Temple University, where he founded the PhD program in African American Studies. He is president of the Molefi Kete Asante Institute for Afrocentric Studies. Asante is known for his writings on Afrocentricity, a school of thought that has influenced the fields of sociology, intercultural communication, critical theory, political science, the history of Africa, and social work. He is the author of over 66 books and the founding editor of the *Journal of Black Studies*.

Asante notably takes inspiration from Karenga’s ideologies and implements them into his own. This can be seen within his earlier books entitled *The Afrocentric Idea*, an intellectual take on his concept of Afrocentricity. Asante acknowledges how African rhetoric is very oral, like Karenga, explaining it as a vital part of rhetoric because of the culture. “The study of African American oratory is intricately interwoven with the study of history, and a central aspect of African American history is the persistent public discussions related to our American experience” (Asante 95). He refers to public discussions to show how these speeches or dialogs

of the African American experience shaped the use of language in rhetoric. African American orature is one of resistance via spoken word against or acknowledging oppression.

Asante also utilizes the African foundations of Nommo. He uses its idea of unity and material reorganization while also emphasizing its concept of reconstruction from an African center.

Any interpretation of African culture must begin at once to dispense with the notion that, in all things, Europe is teacher and Africa is pupil. This is the central point of my argument. To raise the question of an imperialism of the intellectual tradition is to ask a most meaningful question as we pursue African rhetoric, because Western theorists have too often tended to generalize from a Eurocentric base. What I seek to demonstrate in this section is the existence of an African concept of communication rooted in traditional African philosophies. (Asante 71)

Asante takes what Karenga says about Nommo and expands on the relearning and recentering of Africans from underneath European structures. He draws this as the basis for which resistance can start within the mind before being materialized.

This resistance is another key feature of African rhetoric as defined by both Karenga and Asante. Asante reasserts the role of rhetoric as a tool of resistance within African culture.

We invent out of the substance of our culture and from nothing else. If by accident we create something—say, a discourse—that is not based in our culture, then it is not truly invented and not a matter of rhetoric. As a creation, my discourse is new, derived from substances organized in a novel way. A protest speaker, therefore, originates the protest universe of discourse from the unique cultural conditions accompanying the state of oppression or denial that gives birth to the protest in the first place. (Asante 122)

Resistance is a shared staple of African rhetoric because of the conditions that have shaped the continued discourse surrounding the community. Asante asserts that it is rhetorical strategies of African philosophies that will liberate African people from both the dominating systems of oppression and the Western-European constructions that uphold it.

Asante's biggest philosophical achievement was the creation of Afrocentricity. In 1980, Asante published *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, which initiated a discourse around the issue of African agency and subject place in historical and cultural phenomena. He proposed that Africans had been moved off-center in terms on most questions of identity, culture, and history. Afrocentricity sought to place Africans at the center of their own narratives and to reclaim the teaching of African American history from where it had been marginalized

by Europeans. This takes after Karenga's ideas on Nommo, reconstruction, and reclamation:

I have been arguing that all analysis is culturally centered and flows from ideological assumptions; this is the fundamental revelation of modern intellectual history. An Afrocentric method is concerned with establishing a world view about the writing and speaking of oppressed people. Current literary theories—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and structuralism, for example—cannot be applied, whole cloth, to African themes and subjects. Based as they are on Eurocentric philosophy; they fail to come to terms with fundamental cultural differences. (Asante 28)

Asante calls for a change in consciousness, a paradigm shift, as the start of resistance towards the freedom of African people. African people will not be able to fully release themselves from the constraints of Western-European domination without being able to first recognize and articulate the indoctrinated ideologies that are not their own.

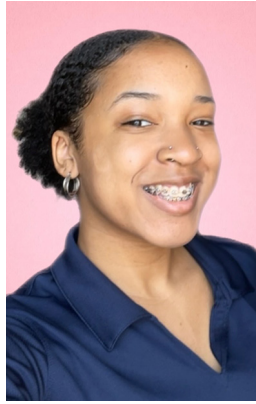
As seen with Karenga and Asante, African rhetoric has kept an ethical approach. The key crisis in the African world is the continued oppression and disturbing decentering of African people from a subject position within their own narrative. This off centeredness of Africans is a result of Arab and European influence and military, cultural, and social intrusions that have dislocated African people. The effects of slavery and colonialization still persist today, giving rise to similar African philosophers like Asante, who still agree with and use similar, applicable methods of African rhetoric. African rhetoric, unlike European forms, has been consistent due to the conditions surrounding the need for this rhetoric. An ongoing history of oppression and dehumanization has led to the use of rhetoric not only as a tool of criticism like in Western models, but one of resistance: "Having to defend our humanity, to agitate for minimal rights, and to soothe the raw emotions of mistreated fellows, our speakers have been forced to develop articulate and effective speech behavior on the platform" (Asante 16). This is exemplified by the continuation of African rhetorical methods from Karenga to Asante. African orature, Nommo, Medu Nefer, and its ethical concerns have been the sole purpose of African rhetoric because of those conditions. Africans were not only removed from Africa and shipped to the Americas, they were separated from their own philosophies, languages, religions, myths, and cultures. African people are relegated to the periphery--the margin of the European experience, to use Molefi Asante's terms—spectators of a show that defines us from without. In other words, African people do not exist on their own terms, but on borrowed European ones. This is why Karenga and Asante identify the roles of rhetoric as resistance, reconstruction, and reclamation for the goal of freedom and liberation of all peoples. The constant form of resistance combines activism and reeducation to shape an ethical approach to rhetoric. Ultimately, it is Black activism and intellectualism that pushes the continuity of Africana philosophy. Humanity's past and present

continue to shape current and new ideas. Because of this, rhetorical ideologies still contrast and conflict with one another because of their cultural and historical foundations.

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WynterRose Hill is an up-and-coming author and a student at the University of Central Florida. She was raised in Tampa, Florida and originally attended the University of Central Florida to major in pre-health. She is currently a junior majoring in Writing and Rhetoric with a minor in Creative Writing. She enjoys video games, analyzing films, and, like most other students, overthinking about the state of society. Such overthinking is what contributed to her work on thoughts and rhetorical ideology in “How Culture and History Shape Rhetorical Ideas: African Rhetoric Within the Western World,” her first published piece. The submission conveys the relevance of the formation and molding of ideas and the general reasoning for why people think the way they do. She hopes to continue to widen the readers’ lens in her future works. a minor in Writing and Rhetoric this May 2022.