

Prevalence of an African American Liberation Theory: Context for Praxis

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present a theoretical framework for understanding the concept of African American liberation. African Americans have persevered through difficult and challenging life experiences, and the theoretical framework in this paper represents a path for voicing these experiences and bringing them to light through praxis. The framework rests on the philosophical underpinnings of Africentricity as a key frame of reference in defining liberation. Also central to the framework are the dimensions of liberation, the Black Liberation Methodology, and themes of liberation, which together form a context for praxis that occurs through consciousness, healing, and transformation.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present a theoretical framework that contextualizes African American consciousness about Black liberation which has prevailed over time and transformed into action or praxis. African Americans, in general, have defined liberation in ways that have been influenced by economic conditions as well as political, social, cultural, and educational agendas (Ture & Hamilton, 1992). Liberation ideologies can be found in storytelling and narrations born out of African Americans' struggles for freedom, which have been passed down through generations and linked to the experience of enslavement in the United States. Black liberation theology developed from a theoretical framework steeped in stories of struggle. In the history of African American enslavement, the terms of "freedom" and "liberation" are often interchangeable.

In Knox's (1998) study, participants defined liberation as culture and history, value of self, economics, education, and the

spirit or spirituality, suggesting there is no decisive term that defines liberation. The meaning to liberation for African Americans has evolved through a transformative process that involves consciousness and movement to action or praxis. Bennett (1972) explained that, "a philosophy of liberation requires transformation...everything must be made new" (p. 311).

Black Liberation Theology

Cone (1975), a noted author in Black theology, described liberation as follows:

Liberation is not a human possession but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression. Liberation is not an object but the *project* of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation (p.138).

Christianity centered Jesus Christ as The Liberator: "there is no liberation independent of Jesus' past, present, and future coming" (Cone 1975, p. 138). Not all people of African ancestry identify Jesus as the source of their liberation. Cone (1986) stated that Black liberation theology is partial, fragile and incomplete, as the drama of the struggle continues, suggesting that liberation is best understood as a response to the concrete historical and existential concerns of the oppressed.

Evans (1992) agreed that liberation is an ongoing process for African Americans:

They are people who know what it means to wrest some small joy out of disappointment, to celebrate life's victories, to endure life's pains, and to sense a measure of triumph in the living of each day...This is the experience of a people who understand that liberation is fragile, but precious. (p. 16)

Black Liberation

The concept of Black liberation has an historical context tracing back to African people who fought against colonialism in Africa (Fanon, 1967; Harris, 1983). One example is Nkrumah's fight for the independence of Ghana, West Africa. Nkrumah (1964) contributed the concept of philosophical consciencism, which meant Africans reclaiming their culture from Western domination. He focused on personal consciousness as a developmental process, continuous self assessment, reflection on the African identity as a sense of pride and action: "Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty" (Nkrumah 1964, p. 4).

Cabral (1973) added the significance of cultural roots or source as the foundation for liberation as oppressed people struggled to be free from colonial domination (Asante & Abarry, 1996; Hilliard, 1995).

Fanon (1967) also wrote about liberation in the context of the decolonization of nations, emphasizing physical revolution as a viable method.

Mandela (1965, 1994) fought for freedom from apartheid in South Africa and was imprisoned for 27 years. He spoke of liberation consciousness; "I was born with the hunger to be free" (p. 543). He went on to state, "Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them; the chains on all of my people were the chains on me" (p. 544). This vision was shared by his former wife, Winnie Mandela, who played a vital role in the struggle against apartheid. She proclaimed:

The determination, the thirst for freedom in little children's hearts was such that they were prepared to face machine guns with stones. That is what happens when you want to break those chains of oppression (as stated in Benjamin, 1984, p.112).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. approached the struggle for liberation through peaceful or nonviolent means (Hord & Scott, 1995). According to Dr. King, a defining moment in the Civil Rights Movement came when a child no more than 8 years old participating in a demonstration with her mother and was asked by a police officer, "What do you want?". Without fear she replied, "Freedom" (King, 1963, p. 98). Liberation was also in the action of Rosa Parks, recognized as the mother of the modern-day Civil Rights Movement in America, best described as an "example of quiet courage, dignity, and determination" (Parks & Reed, 1994).

Freire stated that liberation is, "one from alienation, domination, and oppression, thus not a purely spiritual liberation, but one which is rooted in the concrete historical situations of human existence" (Elias, 1994, p. 139). He further asserted that, "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one" (Freire 2004, p. 49).

Framework for Liberation: A Theoretical Model

The definition of liberation varies in meaning according to different experiences. Therefore, the emergence of a theoretical framework for liberation attempts to explain how people experienced struggle and how historical events impact their current existence.

The foundation for the theoretical framework presented here encompasses four components: 1) Akinyela's (as cited in Darder, 1995) Critical Africentricity, which defines the tenets of African-centered thought; 2) Evans' (1992) three dimensions of liberation: cultural, physical, and spiritual, along with a fourth dimension, psychological, defined by Knox (1998); (3) the four elements in Burrow's (1994) Black Liberation Methodology-passionate language, lived story, significance of reason and contextual-dialectical method, which provide an explanation for the interpretation of liberation; and (4) Knox's (1998) five themes to provide descriptors of the first three components (discussed below). As illustrated in Figure 1, these four components comprise the framework for understanding how African Americans experienced liberation.

African-Centered Theory

African-centered theory positions people of African ancestry at the center of their existence and worldview. It is a philosophy that defines African American people as they see themselves in relation to their Black experience. Asante (1988) wrote: “An ideology for liberation must find its existence in ourselves, it cannot be external to us, and it cannot be imposed by those other than ourselves; it must be derived from our particular historical and cultural experience” (p. 31). He defined this philosophy as Afrocentricity:

Afrocentricity is the belief in the centrality of Africans in post modern history. It is our history, our mythology, our creative motif, and our ethos exemplifying our collective will. On the basis of our story, we build upon the work of our ancestors who gave signs toward our humanizing function (Asante, 1988, p. 6).

Karenga (1993) asserted that Afrocentricity can coexist with other philosophies. “Afrocentricity is not built on or conceived as a denial of worth and values to others. On the contrary, conceptually it includes both a particular (African) and universal (human) dimension” (p. 34). This requires a paradigm shift to not placing European philosophy at the center of the existence of African people. Akinyela (as cited in Darder, 1995) explained:

Critical Africentricity is a philosophy of praxis aimed at creating effective strategies of liberation from the multiple forms of domination experienced by African people born in the United States...and throughout the diaspora (p. 32).

African-centered thought validates the significance of stories of the African American experience, thus providing opportunities for much-needed dialogue (King & Mitchell, 1990). Gwaltney (1993) cautioned researchers to check and cross-check before attempting to explain what he called “the core black culture,” which is represented by many Blacks in mainstream America.

Describing Critical Africentricity, Akinyela (as cited in Darder, 1995) defined consciousness as the personal awareness possessed by individuals of shared collective experience and connected interests within the group, in the context of common social, political, and cultural conditions. Thus, African-centered theory provides African people a way to voice their experiences which is pivotal in their quest for liberation. Additionally, Akinyela (as cited in Darder, 1995) posits the need for a collective liberatory consciousness as a necessary act against Eurocentric control for what he referred to as “New Afrikans” (p. 36).

Critical Africentricity

The theoretical framework for liberation begins with Critical Africentricity, representing the philosophy and thoughts of African American people. African culture continues to make an indelible print on their present experiences. Critical Africentric theory is a way to define a worldview that takes into consideration the African Americans bond with the African experience (Darder, 1995). Critical Africentricity recognizes that which was Africanized while acknowledging that an Africentric theory was interrupted by enslavement. African people adapted their African customs, religious practices, and linguistic patterns to the oppressive changes, which provided strength for their survival. Akinyela (as cited in Darder, 1995) pointed out that Black people in the United States have not been passive objects of a process of de-Africanization, but instead have been subjected to the process of Americanization. African Americans were active subjects in a process of Africanizing the European culture as they adjusted their burden of enslavement in such a way that it remained African. Thus, African-centeredness has become integrated into the American culture, shaping the lens through which African Americans experience liberation.

Dimensions of Liberation

African American liberation perspective is multidimensional: Physical, spiritual, cultural, (Evans, 1992) and psychological

added by Knox (1998), independent in meaning, but very much interconnected.

Physical liberation refers to the innate desire of all human beings to enjoy freedom of movement and self-determination (Evans, 1992, p. 16). African American were forced into physical bondage but even once freed, the chains and shackles were replaced with other restrictions some of which are still in place. For example, housing discrimination and police brutality serve as threats of physical limitations, impeding access to the full right of movement in the United States.

The *spiritual empowerment* dimension is the struggle among African Americans to understand and reclaim their intrinsic worth as human beings (Evans, 1992, p. 17). It is what keeps life in perspective while expanding beyond measurable physical boundaries. When all else fails, the spirit enables African Americans to prevail under the most adverse situations. Rosa Parks (Parks & Reed, 1994) was physically threatened, and Fannie Lou Hamer (Mills, 1993) was physically beaten, but both were able to exhibit this spirit. The spiritual dimension of liberation provides African Americans with a source of energy that transforms resilience into survival and furnishes the determination to come back again and again, with little regard to the odds. Spirit is the force and power present when it seems all else has failed (Ani, 1994; Myers, 1988).

Cultural liberation refers to freedom from negative self-images, symbols, and stereotypes (Evans, 1992, p. 17). Black skin color has historically been an external symbol of inferiority, as well as the behaviors, styles, and customs associated with Africa. The acceptance of an African identity and a sense of self-worth transcend the experience of oppression (Bennett, 1970, Hale-Benson, 1982; Herskovits, 1958; Karenga, 1993; Nobles 1985; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Sudarkasa, 1996; Van Sertima, 1976).

Psychological liberation refers to the historical and emotional trauma experienced by African Americans (Knox, 1998). This dimension is critical in understanding the long term effects from the

brutal pain endured through the Middle Passage (Feelings, 1995) and four hundred years of enslavement in the United States, sometimes referred to as the Black Holocaust (Thomas, 1997). Psychological scars can remain long after physical chains are removed. Robinson (2001), in his continued fight for reparation, goes so far as to imply that what was done during the enslavement of Africans resulted in “ill-reparable damage.” Hillard (1997) suggests that psychological liberation requires there be a reawakening—a rebirthing and healing of the African mind. These four dimensions of liberation should, therefore, happen on an individual and a collective level.

Black Liberation Methodology

According to Cone (1984), Black liberation theology arose as a response to the Black Power movement and a way for Black clergy to connect Black theology to the liberation theology of Gutierrez (2000) and others. It emerged as an expression of Black freedom in the church and in politics. Burrow’s (1994) assessment of Cone’s Black liberation theology offered a liberation methodology forming the socio-religious and cultural contexts of the black experience in the United States. His Black Liberation Methodology examines four elements as interpretative lens to view the African American experience: 1) lived story, 2) passionate language, 3) the significance of reason, and 4) the contextual dialectical method.

African Americans have a lived story that must be taken seriously (Burrows, 1994). Their lived story is heard through voices telling of the pain, struggle, and victory for liberation. These lived stories serve as blueprints to design their present and future lives. African Americans often tell their lived stories with passion and emotion. Passionate language becomes an essential means to explaining the African American experience. This notable distinction was expressed by Frederick Douglass, whose speeches contained language that stirred the consciousness of America to look at the evil of slavery. “Oh! Had I the ability and could reach the nation’s ear, I would pour out a fiery stream of ridicule, reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke” (as cited in Gregory, 1971, pg. 2).

The same holds true for fiercely spoken words by Harriet Tubman: “I have heard their groans and sighs, and seen their tears, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them” (as cited in Beilenson & Jackson, 1992). Hamer’s passionate words “I’m sick n’ tired of being sick n’ tired” (as cited in Mills, 1993) express the depth of yearning for liberation.

Passionate language ignites the fire in voices even when softly spoken by Rosa Parks, “I made up my mind not to move” (as cited in Bell, 1996, p. 27). Cone contends that this passionate language “reflects the rhythm and feelings that arise out of the struggle for freedom” as cited in Burrow, 1994, p. 50).

Burrow (1994) stated that reason is a crucial tool for theological analysis (p. 51). When people of African ancestry tell their own stories, they should reflect what is important to them. Burrow (1994) contends that the “structure of logic” for Black people emerges from the context of Black oppression.

The contextual-dialectical method used by Cone (as cited in Burrow, 1994) could explain the ongoing tension and interplay between Black theology and the Black religious-cultural experience. Cone’s explanation of the contextual-dialectical method:

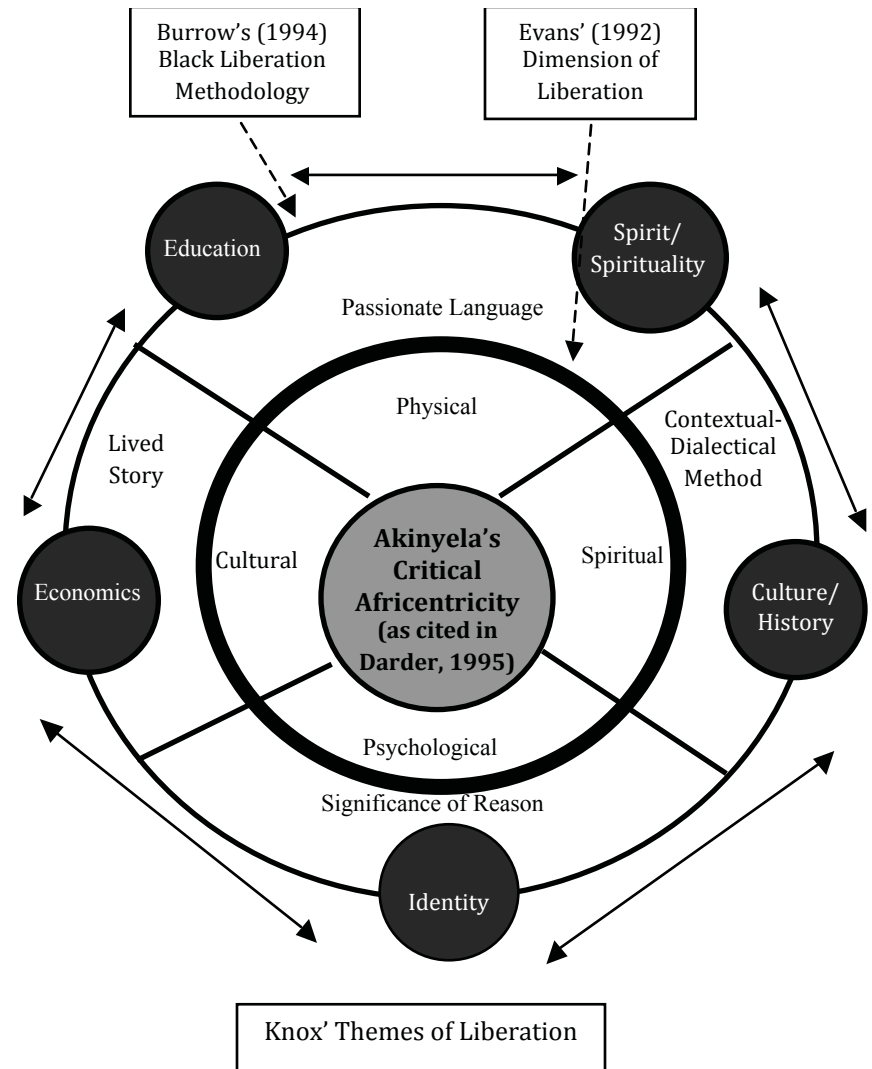
Black Theology’s reflection on liberation is derived from the social context of the black struggle of freedom, as found in our prayers, songs, and sermons. In these black expressions are disclosed the truth about our struggle” (as cited in Burrow, 1994, p. 52).

The contextual-dialectical method offers a way to grasp the complexity of differences in society and to understand there will be tension in defining the reality of a condition. Therefore, what becomes the truth of the dominant culture cannot be viewed as the absolute or universal truth.

The conceptualization of a theoretical framework is drawn together from five themes derived in earlier research by Knox

(1998): Education, economics, identity, culture and history, and a sense of spirit or spirituality. Figure1 illustrates a theoretical model for the framework for liberation.

Figure 1.
Framework for liberation: A theoretical model



Summary of the Model

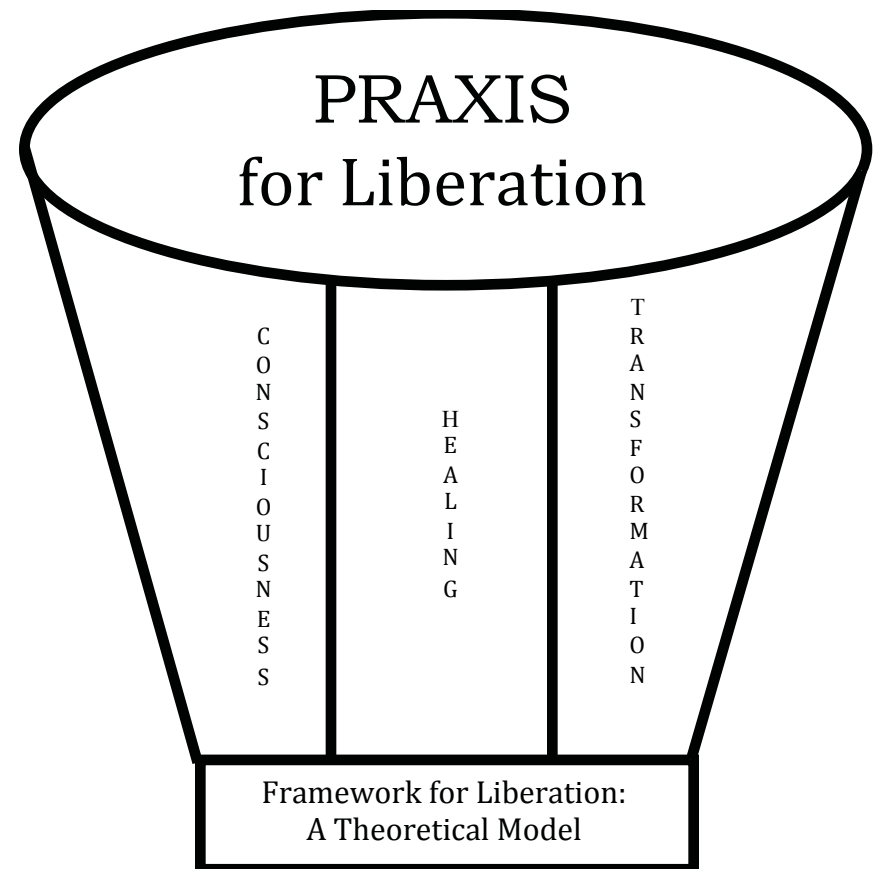
This theoretical framework for interpreting the voices of African Americans has been developed to illustrate the components that are critical for the process of liberation. The framework begins with the African-centered worldview, placing Critical Africentricity at the middle of the Black experience, recognizing the importance of the culture and history of African American people. Evans (1992) expresses the levels of the liberation. Burrow's (1994) Black Liberation Methodology provides an interpretation for the African American experience. These three components interconnect to create the type of paradigm necessary for an understanding of Black liberation. The five generative themes of education, spirit or spirituality, culture and history, value of self, and economics further understanding of the first three components to praxis.

This theoretical framework provides a method which moves in the direction of praxis. Praxis is action, activity, and reflection (Burrow, 1994, p. 41; Freire, 2004, p. 87). Figure 2 illustrates the process for praxis in the context of Black liberation. The three phases (consciousness, healing, and transformation) can be experienced as parallel processes. For example, one can be in a state of consciousness while undergoing transformation. It is also likely that healing will take place throughout this experience.

In order to understand and define their liberation, African Americans have to come to a level of consciousness that begins with African-centeredness. That is, they must manifest what Clarke (as cited in Asante & Asante, 1985) called an Africa-consciousness. "We have to accept and embrace the fact that we are people from Africa, the center of our history and culture." Wilson's (1993) idea of consciousness takes into account the transformation of the enslaved self into an African self or the development of the African personality as discussed by Nkrumah. Hilliard (1997) related transformation to the reawakening of the African mind. Healing is the restorative response to transformation, placing emphasis on the care of the spirit. This phase addresses the residual psychological pain

of enslavement. Understandably, the discomfort of healing can lead many African Americans to avoid this phase.

Figure 2.
Praxis for Liberation



African Americans move toward the praxis of liberation in the telling of their lived stories which is also useful in healing. African Americans can connect with the spiritual dimension (faith, hope, courage, determination, persistence, perseverance, etc.), which can provide them with the strength to maintain their commitment to liberation. As a result of consciousness and healing, a transformative action occurs. It promotes a spiritual connection that strengthens and

adds to a vision of the African self. This continuous flow of action has the potential to communicate messages of liberation, and out of this dynamic process, consciousness, healing, and transformation become the conditional forces for praxis.

Conclusions

Three important conclusions can be drawn from this conceptualization. First, the theoretical framework provides a method for African Americans to reinforce their belief in their own resilience. The framework merges African-centeredness, as the reference point for the African American experience, with the dimensions of liberation and the Black Liberation Methodology, leading to a worldview that reflects the unique cultural and historical experiences of African Americans. Second, the value of their voices in the liberation process is an integral part of the process. Third, through the process, African Americans recognize themselves as active participants in their struggle for liberation.

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