

BENAC Project - African Centered Education: Culture, Community & Maroonage

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*Background*

Maroons are people of African descent who were able to escape from enslavement during the Middle Passage (aka Maafa) and create free societies that they enhanced and protected with their lives in order to ensure that they would never have to return to the plantations (Harris, 2000; Price, 1979). 'Maafa' is an African-derived word that refers to the period of the destruction of African people during the time that Europeans enslaved Africans and colonized the continent of Africa (Ani, 1994). Maroons represent those Africans who escaped and often were able to out-strategize or even kill their European captors. Maroon villages still exist, and we can learn much from them. **I wanted to know what life was like for people to be able to acquire a less white-washed/European education. What must it be like to know about European culture but have your own African-derived culture that you actually practice still intact?** I was highly curious about those things because I wanted to know **if any of what the Maroons were doing could be transferred over to our context in the US to help create better circumstances for African American children**, who are struggling in US public schools, and African American people, who according to countless reports, are struggling in US society because of White supremacy (Anderson, 2001). A study of best practices for people of African descent includes a focus on those culturally centered practices where Black students are being truly educated and Black communities are experiencing a measure of success. I deemed the village we visited, which I call Maroon de Village (MdV), as being 'successful' because through my initial visit, I found that they are a 100% Black/African population with no crime, they police themselves through a group called the 'Maroon Guardians', nearly 100% of the adults in the village are married with families, not a single person is in jail, and every person in MdV belongs to a 'Kuagro' for a lifetime. Kuagro's are small groups of people in your age group who are responsible for acting as non-familial 'brothers and sisters' throughout one's lifetime. In an effort to learn about what MdV villagers are doing both academically and in terms of their overall cultural/socialization processes, I traveled there with a former doctoral student to visit their community.

My initial goal was to learn more about socialization and schooling, and that effort is still under way. One of the major activities in which I engaged was to create a documentary that highlights the most important aspects of MdV. In exploring the future of Black education, the purpose of this project is to pull critical cultural practices and artifacts from the MdV context that were explored in the film (which is called *For Humanity: Culture, Community and Maroonage*) and use those practices and artifacts to enhance the education of Black youth and (re)connect them with their African cultural heritage.

Below is literature that connects

*Literature*

African Centered Education and Maroonage: The Connection

The Maroons are African people who escaped from enslavement and established sovereign space that was hidden away from those that had enslaved them. Many of the villages (sovereign spaces) that they created still exist throughout the Americas. 'Maroonage' is the concept that people of African descent can utilize the 'spirit' of the maroons in order to create liberated spaces for Black people throughout the world. Since African centered educators and scholars believe that outcomes for Black children will only improve when the education offered to Black children is focused on the needs and interests of the Black community, the Maroons are perhaps the best example of that since they built entire societies that are based on the needs and interests of their (all Black) communities in the Americas. Maroon villages are living examples of what African centered theorists are advocating for within Black communities. In that sense, a Maroon village represents an African centered ideal. African centered education literature expounds the imperative connections between creating a relevant and meaningful education for Black children and the kind of conceptual building blocks that would be necessary to do so – those building blocks are already present in Maroon societies. African centered education scholars advance several concepts that constitute the cultural imperatives of African centered ideas in education. The cultural imperatives are the 'main ingredients' of African centered ideas in education. In other words, certain concepts provide the ideological basis for creating an African centered experience. The concepts include identity, Pan Africanism, African/African American culture, African values adoption and transmission, Black Nationalism, community control/institution building and education as opposed to schooling. All of those concepts are part and parcel of the maroon reAfricanization process. In the process of working with children and communities, African centered educationists incessantly use those concepts – they are the baseline stated and ostensible 'material' of African centeredness. In that sense, the literature below situate maroonage within the context of African centered education (and community life). The constructs below have been developed over time by African centered theorists and educationists as the optimal cultural material, values, and philosophies, which interestingly, are (non-academically) inherent within MdV. In the next section, I provide a brief description of each construct.

*The critical Need for an African Identity and Pan Africanism*

African centered educators and scholars advance the notion that Black children are, in fact Africans, and since they are Africans, they should be taught from a cultural perspective that is Pan Africanist. Pan Africanism is the belief that all people of African descent throughout the world are Africans. African centered

educators believe that the identity crisis began for African (Americans) as soon as the first ship left the African shore. That is, the Black identity crisis has its roots in the chattel slavery experience in America. African centered theorists call for the enactment of Pan Africanism by asserting that 'The Pan Africanist principle is the belief that Africa is the home of all people of African descent and all Black people should work for the total liberation and unification of Africa and Africans around the world...and schools for African American children should be based upon this principle' (Lomotey, 1978, p. 60). With Africa as the 'common theme' among people of African descent, African/African American culture must be used as a guide to restore African humanity (Akoto, 1992; Akoto & Akoto, 1999; Anwisy, 2009; Hilliard, 1991; King 2006; Lomotey, 1978; Madhubuti, 1973).

### *ReAfricanization: African Culture and Values Adoption and Transmission*

African centered educators and scholars believe that children of African descent must be taught their African cultural heritage for the purpose of reAfricanization. ReAfricanization is literally the process of studying, observing, and eventually fully practicing an African culture, which is what the Maroons did. Traditionally, the ancestors of people of African descent have used various cultural practices and beliefs as guides to define, create, celebrate, sustain and develop themselves. African centered educationists purport that this longstanding tradition of using African culture in such ways is threatened because Blacks are unaware of African cultures. According to Molefi Asante (1988, p. 1), Blacks not knowing about the cultures that have brought them thus far causes, '... their images, symbols, lifestyles, and manners [to be] contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development'. Karenga's (1980) research included his study of several cultural groups on the continent of Africa as he attempted to find ways to concretely demonstrate what an African value system is, and how such value systems relate to the cultures of Black people. In that same vein, Madhubuti (1973, p. 14) explains that 'Our survival lies in our ability to operate out of an African frame of reference based upon a proven value system that incorporates a sense of African love and responsibility'. This type of transmission leads to a sense of African nationalism (Ani, 1994; Asante, 2007; Hale, 1982; Hilliard, 1996, 1997, 2002; James, 1954; King, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1992; Lomotey, 1978; Nobles, 1986).

### *Black Nationalism*

African centered educators and scholars believe that wherever Blacks happen to be in the world, they constitute a nation or a nation that is within a nation and that concept is called Black nationalism. Black nationalism requires that Blacks develop a sense of agency towards fixing the problems within their own communities. Black children must be the catalysts for helping to instill a sense of agency in the Black community because African centered theorists believe that the generations before have only been taught how to consume and be dependent on outside entities. Agency eventually leads to nationbuilding. Agency and

nationbuilding involve the intentional and focused attempt to ‘develop African youth to be specifically trained to further develop and administrate the state’ (Lomotey, 1978, p. 60). Blacks cannot learn to ‘administrate the state’ if they are not equipped with attitudes that teach them that they, in fact, should administer and be agents for Black upliftment. Black nationalism is the carrier of such a sentiment, that is, Black nationalism teaches Black children that Blacks are a group with a purpose and are not simply victims. The literature on African centered education identifies nationalistic community building as a call for Blacks to build institutions that will sustain African life (Hilliard, 1996, 1997, 2002; James, 1954).

### *Community Control/Institution Building*

African centered educators and scholars hold and maintain that there can be no true African centered education unless and until people of African descent create and control the institutions within the Black community. Institution building involves creating the necessary agencies that are designed to ‘impart knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to survive and progress’ (Doughty, 1973, p. 3). The assumption made by African centered educationists is that Black owned and controlled education systems ‘... will eliminate the injustices and miseducation of the present educational system, and create a strong basis for change in the lives of people of African descent’ (Doughty, 1973, p. 3). It follows though that since the adults in Black communities have been miseducated (Woodson, 1933), a process of reclaiming responsibility and resurrecting the community must take place in schools for generations to come. African centered educators worry though, because schools train, they do not educate (Doughty, 1973; Lomotey, 1978; Madhubuti, 1973; Ratteray, 1990).

### *Education as Opposed to Schooling*

African centered scholars distinguish between education – which is a transformative process that leads toward skill mastery and knowledge of oneself, and training – which is a process of learning how to get along in a system. True education offers students knowledge of how to administer within their own communities and how to solve the problems therein as well. In his (1994) book, Shujaa skillfully explains the difference between education and schooling while also highlighting the detrimental effects when we mistake one for the other. He states that, ‘The schooling process is designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the European-American elite in its social order. For African Americans, individual success in schooling is often simply a matter of demonstrating one’s ability to represent the interests of the European American elite. Through such a process, African people as a group are able to derive little benefit from the schooling of our members and, even then, it is most likely to be in the interests of the European American elite for us to do so’ (p. 10). It is improbable that the education that Blacks receive in public institutions will ever reform itself to the point that Blacks receive the tools that are necessary

for them to have agency over their lives. For this reason, African centered educationists call for a revolutionary re-conceptualization of Black education. This re-conceptualization is anchored by the concept of reAfricanization (King, 1992; Shujaa,1994; Woodson, 1933).

*ReAfricanization and Maroonage*

ReAfricanization calls for people of African descent to reattach themselves to African cultures, which is what the Maroons did as they established their sovereign villages. Although African culture is understood as non-static, the traditional practices of continental Africans are viewed as proper cultural examples for people of African descent. The Maroons are an example of how traditional African practices can be transferred to a different context. The question of which African culture one attaches to is of little concern to advocates of reAfricanization because they maintain that any cultural attachment to Africa would be more beneficial than Western culture because it alienates Blacks children from themselves (Akoto & Akoto, 1999). The three broad overlapping stages of reAfricanization (including rediscovery/historical recovery, redefinition/cultural reaffirmation, and revitalization/national liberation) constitute the phases that people, who are committed to reAfricanization, go through. The three stages indicate crucial aspects of what is considered to be a return to African cultural practice (Akoto & Akoto, 1999). The African centered understanding of culture includes Blacks from all over the world adopting African cultures because within African culture lies the answer(s) to many of the challenges that Black people face.

*Understandings*

The critical importance of understanding what you value (things I noticed in MdV).

MdV Values vs. Non-MdV Values

<b>MdV Values</b>	<b>Non-MdV Values</b>
Traditional values & culture	Clothing and appearance
Kuagros - looking at yourself from the inside out	Looking at yourself from the outside
Mental, familial, and socio-emotional soundness	Jobs, convenience, appearance and self-promotion
Dialogue for problem solving and community maintenance	Minding your own business/shallow engagement/individualized behavior

### *Evidence that MdV Values “Work”*

In a village of 5,000 people:

- In MdV, no one is in jail
- There is no homelessness
- There are no children without family connection
- Nearly 100% of adults are married
- There hasn't been a violent crime since the 1980's

Questions this project is raising relate to the reason why our African ancestors created more 'villages' than they did 'cities'; perhaps because of the difference between what we are experiencing in cities such as Washington, DC and New York such as police brutality, miseducation, the degradation of Black families and communities and increasing indifference toward one another; versus what people are experiencing in villages such as MdV, including a sense of community and family, a sense of peace, a recognition of the humanity of members of one's community, and a sense of one's role and purpose in life. Yes, they have less economic resources, but they get to live in a functional community. I began to ask myself is it more important to conduct research and make a documentary that describes MdV or should we conduct research and make a documentary that makes it clear what MdV could mean in terms of healing for those of us who live in contexts where Black people are experiencing the degradation of our human and cultural infrastructure. I/we chose the latter, and decided to title it 'For Humanity: Culture, Community and Maroonage', which captures the essence of what is important to us and Maroons.

### *My Project*

As a result of the Maroons' successful village life, my project is about transferring cultural practices and artifacts from the MdV environment into the Black education process in the US where possible. Doing that increases the number of available cultural mental, physical, and spiritual resources available for Black children. One way of making those offerings available would be to pilot three early elementary classrooms (1<sup>st</sup> grade, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade). Using the principles and offerings of African centered education, and preferably an African centered teacher, the classroom would include both the pedagogical offerings of African centered education and pedagogy, cultural, material and ideas that exist within MdV. Specific material from MdV to be detailed include:

- The creation of *kuagros* which would include creating age set groups that will last a lifetime;
- A *maroon guard* that would include a group of youth whose responsibility is to "protect the community" and decide what behaviors and actions are acceptable in the context of the community values;

- *A community of leaders* which would consist of youth responsible for gathering the community to solve pressing issues and leading discussions toward problem resolution through dialogue; the council also ensures that all aspects of the community and culture are being operationalized at all times.
- *A history and culture council* that is responsible for ensuring that the entire community is educated about issues of unity, historical culture, and connections to the Pan African community; the council advises on threats to unity and mechanisms for neutralizing threats;
- A council that ensures that *Maat/Nguzo Saba* values are adhered to within the environment and calls attention to behaviors and attitudes that threaten the community

### *Operationalization Within K-12 Classrooms*

The goal of this is to (re)connect our youth with frameworks that have historically worked for people of African descent. In essence, these classroom redesigns could be created at any grade level; however, the younger the children are, the more meaningful the effort becomes over time. Within environments where the adults want to see it operationalized more immediately, I suggest a middle school classroom. However, with tolerance for allowing the young people to grow and develop into it, the younger the children are the more these efforts can prove beneficial over time.

**Kuagros:** The teacher places all students into groups of 4 to 5 students who are part of a permanent “kuagro”. In MdV, these are gendered. Within US society, they could be gendered or non-gendered. The instructions are as follows: Write down and remember the people in your Kuagro – they will be your non-relative brothers/sisters forever. Always make sure they are able to contact you. Your kuagro group should meet every week for the rest of your life. That meeting can be in person, on the computer/phone, at school, etc. Start all kuagro meetings with a “check in” asking how everyone is doing. Then, each kuagro member gets to discuss what is happening in their lives for a few minutes. Within the kuagro, everyone is always supportive, respectful, you never take advantage of anyone, and you never use sarcasm. Each kuagro member must bring something new/interesting for the kuagro to learn about that relates to a Black cultural group. Also, the group maintains its existence permanently with the help of a “unity member” who’s job it is to focus especially on kuagro group unity. Teachers create opportunities for kuagros to meet together. As kuagro members move to different schools, cities, etc., the kuagro maintains itself throughout time.

1. Start with a check-in
2. State what is happening in your life that you would like to discuss
3. Present something new/interesting related to a Black cultural group

4. All members are responsible for making sure the group always stays together, but one specific group member is called the “unity member” who works to make sure the group stays together throughout the duration of members’ lives.

Kuagros ensure that students are supported by peers for the rest of their lives.

**Maroon Guard:** The teacher appoints  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the students to serve as “maroon guard”. The students get a lesson on what maroonage is, and then they discuss maroonage (students at all age levels can understand maroonage if information is presented in an age-appropriate way). The maroon guard students are responsible for making sure that African-based values are upheld in the classroom (for example the Nguzo Saba). The teacher/community member teaches the students about African-derived values systems (such as Nguzo Saba, Maat, etc.). Students are quizzed about the value system and the value system becomes deeply known to them. Student attitudes and behaviors are assessed in terms of their authentic tethering to the value system. The maroon guard is specifically responsible for helping other students learn about the value system, why it is important, and they point out behaviors and attitudes that are not consistent with the value system. The teacher consults with the maroon guard often when behaviors, attitudes, dispositions appear that are in conflict with the value system.

1. Teacher appoints  $\frac{1}{4}$  of students to the maroon guard.
2. Teach students about an African value system and charge the maroon guard with addressing instances where the value system is being violated. In some instances, the maroon guard may need to meet to discuss the issue. The teacher must be deeply wedded to the value system in order for a maroon guard within a classroom to work. The value system is posed around the classroom. Students post pictures on the walls of people who mean the world to them that can be referred to as both good and not-so-good things occur within the classroom.
3. The maroon guard creates instances where they can teach members of the class about the value system. Contemporary issues (e.g., police brutality) are discussed with reference to the values system. The maroon guard helps lead students toward the incorporation of the values into all situations. The teacher discusses the values often with students.

The maroon guard helps students reconnect with cultural (non-religious) values that reinstitute empathy, good judgement, character, and decency within society. Eventually, students will be able to juxtapose the values of the African value system to foreign/alienating value systems.

**History and Culture Council:** The teacher appoints  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the students as being on the “history and culture council”. Council members read and study information



about Black history. The history and culture council is responsible for finding information and community resources that can reinforce learning about Black cultural groups. The council ensures that a positive attitude toward Black cultural groups exists. They do a monthly presentation focused on Black history and culture. This group meets to discuss what new information exists about Black history and culture and they disseminate that information to the class.

1. The teacher appoints a history and culture council.
2. The council meets to discuss what things they will be reading/studying.
3. The committee decides how and when they wish to teach the class about Black history and culture and they create presentations that are engaging for classmates
4. The Black history and culture committee finds new information and they disseminate important history/cultural information throughout the year.

This council ensures that students and teachers have mechanisms for counteracting much of the negative information (or non-information) that circulates about Black people, history and culture.

The purpose of the committees is to change culture and change what students are talking about within classrooms from the current culture to African centered “maroonage”.

**Community of Leaders:** The teacher appoints  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the students as being on the “community of leaders” committee. The community of leaders is responsible for keeping an eye out to be sure that the kuagros, maroon guard, and the history and culture membership committees are actually doing what each of the committees are charged to do. They met to discuss evidence that kuagros are meeting together, that the maroon guard is instilling agreed upon values, and that the history and culture council is building information and knowledge about Black cultural groups into the overall classroom curriculum. The committee quantifies efforts being made by each of the existing committees, makes suggestions about improvements that may be needed, and they are responsible for making sure that the general ethos of the classroom is focused upon the maroonage.

1. The teacher appoints  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the classroom as community of leaders.
2. The community of leaders learns about their charge and why it is important
3. The community of leaders holds monthly classroom meetings and quantifies efforts they see being made to uphold maroonage, and they make suggestions as to how the community can become more adherent to maroonage through the committees.

The community of leaders ensures that the classroom culture is about maroonage and learning, as opposed to learning and non-African values/cultural infusion.

### *Audience*

The audience for this includes Black educators and education leaders who are concerned about the few options available for Black children to broaden their horizons toward being able to solve problems within their own communities. For each year that the youth are involved in this process, it becomes more practical, and with a teacher who understands the framework, the young people develop skills and enhanced cultural knowledge.

### Recommendations

Maroonage is perhaps the best example of what Africans in the diaspora can do when they have a sense of agency over their lives and their communities. Maroonage is a major pillar in the efforts that some Africans in the diaspora are making toward reAfricanization (re-acquainting with African culture and practicing aspects of it). ReAfricanization (Akoto & Akoto, 1999) is the conscious and focused attempt to reattach the African person with a cultural frame of reference and cultural practices that have come from his/her own African ancestors. While most school administrators and teachers are unaware of the offerings of African centered education and especially maroonage, they should become aware of such offerings through professional development and training because mainstream Eurocentric efforts (often referred to as reform) have made no positive changes for Black children. African centered education offers a way to reconnect the Black child with who s/he is naturally. Maroonage offers a way to conceptualize the building of an infrastructure that can properly nurture and incubate African centered education efforts toward creating Black children who are prepared to solve problems in Black communities. We also know that African centered schools produce Black youth who perform above the norm academically; hence these efforts are secondarily aimed at improving Black students' academic success. However, African Centered leaders have clarified that focusing on culture as opposed to academics produces better adjusted Black youth who also perform better academically. The inclusion of African Centered Education and perceptions from maroonage inherently begin to dismantle inequitable structures endured by Black students.