

**AFRICANA STUDIES:  
A REVOLUTIONARY QUEST FOR DECOLONIZATION AND SOVEREIGNTY**

**By Ahati N. N. Toure. Ph.D.**

**Assistant Professor of Africana History and Black Studies, Department of History, Political  
Science and Philosophy, Delaware State University**

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of Africana Studies' 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner/ Dance Gala held on  
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I came to the Department of Africana Studies, and to the MA program, in the Fall of 1986 and I graduated in May of 1988. In the beginning of 1986 I was Deputy Bureau Chief of United Press International's State Capital Bureau and a member of the Legislative Correspondents Association, right here in Albany.

In fact, I integrated the capital press core in 1984. I think the shock of seeing one lone Afrikan day after day in a sea of European reporters led to the hiring of other Afrikans by the *New York Times*, the *New York Post*, the *New York Daily News*, the *Long Island News Day* (which is what it was called at that time), and some of the local papers. One of them, an evening paper (I believe it was the *Knickerbocker News*), hired a Pakistani woman. While she was not Afrikan, she was, in her complexion, dark like the rest of us.

I covered state government and politics. Mario Cuomo was governor. I was 27 years old and I had completed a BA degree in Public Communications from the College of Saint Rose, focusing on journalism, three years earlier.

But I had come to be bored with the perennial debates concerning the state budget and spending priorities that had little to do with Afrikan progress or priorities. We were, as always, the subjects of major expenditures in repression (criminal justice), or the subject of oft-rehearsed tales of failure (high school dropout rates, youth violence). We were, inevitably, the subjects of a cyclic routine of debates dominated by foreigners about how to deal with "the problem" that they had defined as us.

One of the key sources of my disaffection was my attempt to cover issues of greater relevance to Afrikans in the state. One of my projects in my last year covering the capital focused on Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, and its effort to secure the restoration of its funding as a four-year institution. Its state funding, as a result of New York City's budget crisis in the 1970s, had been reduced to that of a two-year institution. Nothing had been done in the intervening years to restore it. The bureau chief, however, told me my interest in dealing with this question, and by extension, my interest in covering stories having to do with Afrikans in the state, was too narrow.

I, of course, became deeply offended by the notion that my people could be dismissed as being too narrow a subject of journalistic interest. I began to nurture a mutual contempt for a

profession that defined relevance only in terms of Europeans and issues considered important to them. The notion that to be relevant I must reinterpret Afrikan realities in ways that would be comprehensible and/or acceptable to Europeans insulted me to the very core of my being.

Further, increasingly I felt the urgency of the need to explore a more profound knowledge of my people's history, culture, and destiny because I felt overwhelmingly ignorant and because I had some inchoate sense of the urgency of creating a world in which Afrikans no longer existed simply on the terms that other peoples had set for them. Rather, I felt, we should set the terms of our own existence.

So I quit the profession and came up Washington Avenue to the campus of the State University at Albany and to the Department of Africana Studies to become a full time student of the MA program.

I had so many transformative experiences, but one of the very revolutionary events for me intellectually—one that set the agenda for my studies—was a book Dr. Sutherland loaned to me in my first semester. It was Yosef A. A. ben-Jochannan's *Africa: Mother of Western Civilization*. Reading that text had an enduring impact on my thinking; it literally changed my consciousness. It alerted me to the fact that our present condition as Afrikans, our being dominated by a foreign people, is—as the words came to me very precisely at that time—“perverse and unnatural. Everything is upside down.”

One of the great innovations of Afrikan intellectualism is interdisciplinarity, an innovation we introduced from Africana Studies to the university that has now become a staple of advanced academic intellectualism. With new insights into the nature of our condition, I began to study. And not only did I study from numerous disciplinary lenses, merged seemingly seamlessly together in an effort to gain a more complete picture of the Afrikan reality. I also learned how to begin to examine the nature of our problems both locally and globally, and I began to gain some sense of how to begin to solve them. The nature of our studies was to begin to divine the details of the commonalities of our struggle globally and locally and to grasp, as well, a sense of their solution.

At the same time, some of us attempted to make our education have a greater relevance.

Four of us—Janice McCain, Colia Clark, Eric Newton, and I—founded *Nefer Rohu* in a pizza parlor sometime in the early part of 1988. We named the organization after the ancient Kemite prophet who foresaw the disaster and disruption of foreign invasion in ancient Kemet and conquest of the Afrikan nation. Nefer Rohu likewise foresaw the overthrow of foreign invasion, the expulsion of foreigners from the land, and the consequent redemption of Afrikan sovereignty.

Although I was elected its founding president, Colia, a graduate of the MA program and for many years an adjunct professor in the Department, was its creator. Colia conceived the project and pushed me forward to lead it. Indeed, Professor Clark is a veteran organizer of the historic 20<sup>th</sup> century civil rights movement. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, Colia served on the

frontlines with the martyred Medgar Evers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the martyred Dr. King in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

We remained faithful to the activist tradition of the Department's student founders. We launched into community work. We took over a nine-week education program at Greene Correctional Facility with an inmate organization, the Afro-American Cultural Organization. We hosted a free concert in the Albany community. We brought speakers to the campus.

But I suppose the most important implication of Africana Studies is that nature of its effect on human consciousness. One begins to understand that one is not simply a skin color, that one's history begins at the beginning of the human experience, and that one's humanity and one's Afrikanity are central to both the possibility and necessity of liberation.

We begin to measure freedom based on our past, when we were sovereign. One's vision expands beyond the limited, constricted, truncated aspiration of merely surviving in a world run by others. One graduates, instead, to an inner clarity that the world belongs to us as much as it does to any other people and that we must rise to the standard set by our ancestors. We become possessed of a new sense of agency. Only we can free ourselves. Only we can save ourselves.

In Africana Studies we must be inspired by a vision of a new possibility. That is, while as individuals we struggle, we have to understand that systemic problems cannot be solved by individual efforts. This is sovereign thinking.

Systemic problems are solved by systemic solutions, systemic structures, and systemic processes. The mis-education and under-education of our people is created by systems of mis-education and under-education. Those who succeed despite these measures do so accidentally, not systematically. What I did not learn about my people in the 1960s and the 1970s is also what my first year students did not learn in the 1990s and in the first few years of this century. This has happened to millions of Afrikan people in each succeeding decade. This is the efficiency of system.

Sovereign thinking—made possible by our disciplinary studies—helps us now to understand that we can restore to ourselves the unassailable feeling that we are important to ourselves, that we are a beloved people. It teaches us now how to begin to repair and to heal the bonds between us. And this is important, among other reasons, because a strong bond of trust among a people is indispensable to that people's survival. A people who do not feel a strong bond of trust cannot build systems because to work systems require interrelationships among individuals strongly committed and belonging to each other.

Our studies in Africana Studies enable us to grasp, now, that we need to develop the structural capacities for survival. We must construct the economics to fund our liberation. No one else can do this. And that means we must learn to identify markets for the goods and services that we produce. Hip hop and rap music are making billions for others, but we created it. Despite the awesome genius of the late Afrikan scientist George Washington Carver when it came to the peanut, the billions in peanut butter have and continue to be made and enjoyed by other people.

Our economics must be geared for creating the wealth necessary to fund the structural and systemic processes that will sustain and advance our freedom agenda.

What we need, necessarily, then, are dreamers, visionaries. We need people who can imagine, who can reinvent this Afrikan sovereign world in the present in all areas: economic systems and relationships, educational systems, legal systems, communications systems, media and the arts, political or state systems, and the like. What we are engaged in now is the understanding of the necessity for and the creation of structures, processes, and systems that can restructure human relations for the achievement of ultimate possibilities for peoples and persons.

We need, therefore, to expand our imagination to a world in which we are ruling. This is the direction we must go if we are to give our discipline, Africana Studies, true meaning.

Thank you.