

Community Studies 101: An Interview with Kwaku Person-Lynn

by

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Kwaku Person-Lynn is a native of Los Angeles, a husband, father of five sons and two grandchildren. Professionally he is a historian, musicologist, educator, author, filmmaker, and radio producer. He has published two books (e.g., *First Word: Black Scholars, Thinkers, Warriors: Knowledge, Wisdom, Mental Liberation*. New York: Harlem River Press, 1996; *On My Journey Now – The Narrative of Dr. John Henrik Clarke*. Northridge, CA: California State University, Northridge Department of Pan African Studies special edition of *The Journal of Pan African Studies* edited by David L. Horne) and is currently working on a third (expected soon), and over 120 articles, essays and book chapters. In the early 1980s, his dissertation chapter "Rap Music - Afrikan Music Renaissance" was the first scholarly publication on rap/hip hop and has been published in several books and the Internet.

In the early 1970s, he was a record producer for A&M Records, the first Black recording engineer at the company, and only one of four Black record executives in the country. He was also founder of the Malcolm X Center in Los Angeles. He received his bachelor degree from California State University, Dominguez Hills, his master and doctorate from UCLA, being the first person of Afrikan descent in the history of UCLA to graduate from the Individual Ph.D. Program, requiring two majors (Afrikan World History and African World Music, and a minor in anthropology). Dr. Kwaku has also produced two films: *Afrikan World Civilizations*, covering the history, culture and accomplishments of Africans people around the world, the first of its kind, and *Afrikan World Masters*, featuring John Henrik Clarke, Ivan Van Sertima, Frances Cress Welsing and Fela Anikulapo Kuti. He also teaches adult and youth history classes in the community.

Thank you for this interview, I understand that you are a busy person, in the field, educating as many people as you can on the history and culture of the African world.

In reading your bio, one can simply ask how do you find the time to be so accomplished (husband, father of five sons and two grandchildren; historian, musicologist, educator, author, columnist, filmmaker, and radio producer)?

There's that old saying, as you get older, you get wiser. Time management, discipline and focus are part of my every day routine. It may seem like a lot, but I spread it out. First, I start with what is most important to me, my family. There is automatic time built in for my life-partner (wife), sons, who are all grown, and my grandchildren. Although my mother is in another city in California, there is always time for her.

On the other hand, my family also knows when I am really busy, writing, planning, researching, producing or whatever, they give me the time and space I need, and vice versa. One very good and fortunate thing, Isidra and I are partners. When I am teaching in the community, or producing an event, she takes care of the business, so I do not have to even think about that. I could not do half of what I do without her, and she is a busy person herself.

Discipline comes in when I have to write articles every week. I try to start a week in advance. I remember one of my favorite professors, and chair of my history committee, Dr. Boniface Obichere, who was the editor of *The Journal of African History* telling me, "Put down everything that is in your head, then go back and sweeten it up." I try to do that by staying ahead of myself. If I have days to work on something, it always gets better every time I go over it. I have a theme I constantly tell students related to their work, "Stay on top of it, or it will be on top of you."

If I am planning a radio broadcast or a festival, I start months in advance, put everything down on paper and think out every detail. That way I can work at a leisurely pace. I put every scheduled thing on my computer calendar, which I sync to my iPhone, so I don't have to think about what I have to do that day. I just look at my calendar first thing in the morning and do what has to be done. Procrastinators do not make positive revolution, and I am definitely attempting to create a mental revolution.

Doing things at the last minute is not very professional, and puts you in a position to leave something out very important, or to make mistakes. If I am working with other people, and I have control of who they are, they have to be competent, dependable people. They don't always have to be the most experienced, depending on the task, but willing to listen and follow through. If all of that happens, you can pretty much accomplish anything.

One word you have to not be afraid to say is “No.” When I was younger, I would try to do everything. Now, I only commit to those things I know I can do well, generally generated by my self. I am not going to try to impress anyone. I am my hardest critic. I try for perfection the same as our ancient ancestors did in Kemet. I don’t join organizations, although some of our thinkers always tell us that we should. I have seen too many centered on someone’s ego, and not a lot gets done. I am not against organizations. In some instances they are mandatory. I hate to imagine what many cases would have been like without the NAACP during the Civil Rights era. There may have never been a Brown v. Board of Education, Thurgood Marshall, and other prominent attorneys. Without organizations, there definitely would not have been a Malcolm X or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It’s just that I am not an organization person. Most of my work requires tight organization, but not an organization.

People will tell me that they like something that I have done, but I already know that. I will cancel myself if what I did does not meet my standard of quality. I tell students all the time, and some do listen, “Never compromise on quality.” When I did Afrikan Mental Liberation Weekend, I would carefully go over every second that was going to be aired. Every lecture or interview had to meet a standard, or I would pass on it. The main standard was that we have to learn something from whatever lecture or interview was aired.

The bottom line to all this, you have to be organized to succeed at what you are doing, even if it is something as simple as fixing a meal, if you want outstanding results.

Interviewing you obviously seems odd, because you have interviewed some of the best African thinkers/artist past and present, from John Henrik Clarke to Frances Cress Welsing, and in my humble way, I am interviewing a master interviewer. In all of your interviews, who was the most impressive, and why?

The most impressive is the person I am having a conversation with at that moment. I prefer a conversation rather than an interview. Interviews are generally a one-way affair, if the ego doesn’t get in the way. I always approach any individual as someone whom I know very little about, though I might. I think about what do I, and others want to know about this particular person. It is almost like a friend to a friend, that way it frees that individual of any anxiety and we can freely talk about almost anything. The most important thing to remember is that the person I am talking with has a body of knowledge that needs to be preserved for the next generation. With that in mind, I walk in very humbly, always looking the person in the eyes while they are talking, so that they know they have my 100% attention at all times. I find that when a person feels that you are really listening and absorbing, they are more willing to share cherished information with you.

But I have discovered one thing, that it takes a scholar to effectively converse, or interview as you state it, another scholar. You have to have your own body of knowledge so that you can ask meaningful questions that are not always known, that is if you want the highest level of intellectual information.

I read that in your teaching, you are in your fourth year of teaching ‘Black History 4 Young People’. Why did you decide to teach the youth classes (ages 12-18), and what has been your expected, and unexpected result?

Oh, if you call yourself an educator, no matter what level, you have to spend some time with young people. I first started teaching an adult class in the community, Afrikan World Civilizations, because it bothered me that so many so-called Black Studies Programs, Afrikan American Studies, Afrikana Studies, Pan Afrikan Studies, or whatever term used, were spending so much time actually teaching Negro Studies. There are just so many Black faculty who are so unknowledgeable about Afrikan world history and culture. This is an area of study that you almost have to be self-educated on because our institutions are not teaching it, and only a hand full of so-called professors are competent enough to teach in that area. They know the regular stuff like: slavery, colonialism, independence, maybe even neo-colonialism, as far as Afrika goes. When it comes to America, they generally start with slavery, then emancipation, reconstruction, the end of reconstruction, the Black Codes, Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and just might get into Pan Afrikanism.

To me, you always have to start in the Nile Valley, and how Afrikans created civilization and the foundation of science, medicine, law, engineering, mathematics, and on and on and on. It is essential that young people know that their ancestry begins with a magnificent legacy, and not slavery. You also show Cheikh Anta Diop’s 11 categories of evidence, which Asa Hilliard synthesized for us, to convincingly show that the ancient Kamites (Egyptians) were indigenous Afrikans, meaning they were Black. Then you relate that to the Olmec civilization. Van Sertima taught us that the Olmec civilization was an indigenousness American civilization, and that Afrikans from the Nile Valley influenced them by sailing to the Americas hundreds of years before Columbus.

But now, there is some evolving research that is suggesting that the Olmecs may have been Afrikans themselves, and that the Asians who crossed the Bering Straits and migrated throughout America, beginning with the Inuits of Alaska, were influenced by Afrikans. There is precedence for that. Afrikans peopled the world, so why not America? The course is half way over before I even get to slavery. Then you go to Europe and deal with the Moors. If the Moors had not given the Europeans boat technology, there never would have been a slave trade. Can you imagine what this world would be like if that had happened.

Anyway, I took a long way to explain the youth class. First, I started with the adult class, which meets 11 Friday nights twice a year, like semesters. Then I realized that young people need this information too. They are not being taught any of this. There are some teachers I have taught over the years who are sharing some of this information with their students, but not enough.

We cannot withhold that information from our youth, but we have to be careful with them. For instance, when I show them that Columbus did not discover America, I also have to explain to them about being diplomatic with their teachers. One young brother told me that he told his teacher that, and the teacher did not believe him. The teacher gave him a bad grade on that report, even though his mother met with the teacher to explain that it was true. She took my class, but the teacher would not budge. That begs the reality of how teachers have to be re-trained, as far as our history goes. In fact, they need to be re-trained in world history. European scholars, in far too many cases, romanticized and glorified history to be favorable to themselves, leaving us completely out.

In any case, I want our youth to have a head start with our history and culture, from an Afrikan perspective. I do not know any other place where they will get it, unless the parents are knowledgeable themselves, and teach their children, which is really where it should start. That is one thing Asa and I agreed on, parents are the first teachers.

As far as expected/unexpected results, I love the way the students embrace the information. Sometimes you don't think they are listening, but one parent reported to me how she was trying to explain something to her son and he responded, "I already learned that from Dr. Kwaku."

The unexpected was an education major from a major university approached me at the beginning of the youth class and asked if she could sit in. She was going to be assigned to a predominantly Afrikan American middle school teaching Afrikan American history and her training did not prepare her for that. She came every Saturday. That is a depressing situation. Teachers are being trained to teach in schools with students of Afrikan descent, but have no training in the history or culture of the students they are teaching. That is criminal. They are almost being set up for failure. Until an Afrikan perspective is instilled into the curriculum, not only will the schools and students suffer from a lack of information about themselves and what their ancestors have accomplished, but it may also continue the negative stereotypes.

Many youth seemed to be emerged into hip hop culture and stylization, but as you stress in your youth classes, they know very little about its history or origins. How do you educate them on the true history of hip hop when the mass media has commercialized and commoditized its original mission?

First, I make the Afrikan association. Having the good fortune of studying under Professor Kwabena Nketia for six years, the father of Afrikan music, during the masters and doctoral training, I am very versed in universal black music. I show the students what are known as Afrikan musical elements that are involved in rap/hip hop music; things such as: syncopation, multi-rhythmic patterns, call & response, blue notes, blue scales, yea saying, and several others. They begin to see that although rap is a modern musical form, it incorporates musical elements that were/are used in traditional Afrikan music. I also let them know that hand-clapping and foot stomping are the most used musical instruments on the continent, and how a I saw young brothers on a corner, when rap first made its entry into the West Coast, standing on a corner, in a circle, like an Afrikan ring dance formation, handclapping and foot stomping, while another brother was rapping, free stylin', using the Afrikan musical element of improvisation, the same as jazz musicians.

When I was writing my dissertation, which was historical and musicological, being a double major, having to take comprehensive exams in both departments, I wrote the first scholarly work on rap titled, "Rap Music: Afrikan Music Renaissance In America." It was in a book published by the University of California Press, and other publications. There was only one book on the subject at that time, *The Rap Attack: Afrikan Jive To New York Hip Hop.* written by a New York journalist David Toop.

Once we establish that it is modern Afrikan music, I then show them that its foundation did not develop in New York, but Jamaica. The father of hip hop, as a subculture, was DJ Kool Herc, born in Jamaica. He was listening to mento and other musical forms that were played on flat trucks that would move around and start an instant party. When he came to New York, West Bronx, he incorporated that same principal in a park next to his building, and thus, that was the actual beginning of hip hop.

When the students are exposed to all of this, then they have a much greater understanding of their art form, as well as a greater historical appreciation.

As a part of your vast experiences, you have also produced/hosted 'Afrikan Mental Liberation Weekend' for eleven years (a 30 hour weekend production of interviews and lectures from the most prominent African world scholars and thinkers) broadcasted on select public radio stations in the western United States. I understand that any talk about 'African mental liberation' can get some excited to the point they may wonder if the sleeping African masses would awake after hearing your program. In this light, what has been the overall response to 'Afrikan Mental Liberation Weekend' (pro and con), and why do you think it received such a response?

That has been an amazing program. As far as I know, there has not been another like it, although in the Bay Area, I use to send tapes to a sister station and they would play them. The response has been unbelievable. I still get comments after not being on the air for five years. The purpose of doing the program was to expose our community, specifically, and the general public, generally, to our great scholars and thinkers, whom otherwise many would never be exposed to. We needed to hear our history and culture from our perspective.

I learned in graduate school at UCLA, while researching for my dissertation, most of the literature regarding our history and culture were not written by us. And far too often, our history was written from a Eurocentric, colonial perspective. This was not acceptable to me. A lot of us do not read scholarly works, but we will listen to the radio. To know that thousands were listening to the teachings of John Henrik Clarke, Cheikh Anta Diop, Yosef-ben-Jochannan, Ivan Van Sertima, Frances Cress Welsing, W.E.B. DuBois, Asa Hilliard, Na'im Akbar, and many others was transformative to so many lives.

I cannot tell you how many lives have changed. I used to have grown adults, some who were seniors, who would call in, off air, crying. Crying for the jubilation of the first time hearing so many Afrikan intellectuals telling our story, from our perspective, for the first time on the radio. It was like the education many of us never received, even those who were university trained. Sometimes I will go somewhere and someone will approach me saying, "This is the man that lead me to my consciousness." That is a humbling experience. I generally just nod my head because I don't know what to say.

The troubling aspect of doing a program like that, they are done in white-controlled public radio stations that try to be liberal or progressive, so-called. There were always complaints after the broadcast, but nothing like the attacks I received when airing a tape about the Jewish involvement in the slave trade and slavery. I aired a tape by Bertram Korn, considered the top Jewish historian of the Civil War era, who authored *Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South, 1789-1865*. It was a lecture at Fisk University, introduced by John Henrik Clarke.

Prior to airing the tape, I prefaced it by explaining Christian and Muslim involvement, and how Pope John Paul II went to Afrikan and the Caribbean apologizing for the church's involvement in the trade, and how Muslims were still enslaving Afrikans. I mentioned in all of the years of historical training on the graduate level, I had never heard of a Jewish involvement in the trade. The history department was truly covering that up.

I also aired an interview with Leonard Jeffries, at the time he was being demonized, for giving a lecture in Albany, New York about the Jewish involvement in slavery.

After the broadcast, the station manager told me that a Jewish organization had appeared at the Human Rights Commission, or something like that, to try to stop the broadcast before it began. This was 1993. After the broadcast, I was attacked nationally and internationally. Editorials all over the country and in Israel were attacking me. Senator Bob Dole, who was running for president, gave a speech that I was broadcasting hate speech. A bill was introduced in congress to stop funding for the network the station was part of, which did not pass. Jewish professors at the university I was teaching approached the dean to try to get me fired. A couple of times a car would sit in front of our house, across the street, and when I went out to confront them, they would take off like a dog with its tale between its legs. They were trying to intimidate me, but that was not going to work.

What is so ironic, the information was true. In fact, the editor of a local Jewish newspaper went to a UCLA library, did some research, and found out that Jews were involved in the trade. They never acknowledged that what I was saying was true. The chair of the history department at the university I was teaching, who was Jewish, told me, "Of course Jews were involved in slavery." Nevertheless, it would be ten years before I would return to the station and broadcast that program again. That was 2003. The excuse used this time to keep me off the air was that Frances Cress Welsing was homophobic, and the gay community took issue with that.

When I turned in the portion about her talking about homosexuality, it had nothing to do with being homophobic. That was used as an excuse to keep me off the air. Apparently, there were white folks, and a handful of black traitors, working in conjunction with the whites, whose names people would recognize, were able to manipulate me off the air. Having 30 hours of heavy Afrikan intellectual information broadcast on a 112 thousand watt radio station was too much. Even worst, from a Eurocentric perspective, it took the European off the pedestal of being the group that brought all great things to the world. The program turned that around to convincingly show that Europeans were the students of Afrikans, and built on what they were taught, including the university, which they were exposed to for the first in the Nile valley.

In the same context, with 5 to 6 thousand people at your two-day 'Afrikan Mental Liberation Films' which incorporates documentaries, lectures and interviews with key African world scholars; some must have been shocked or simply surprised by the crowd, engaging themselves in knowledge gathering which could potentially raise the cultural and political consciousness of the African masses (I attended one session at Compton College a few years ago, and it was great). Again, what has been the overall response to the film festival (pro and con), and why do you think it received such a response?

However, this is a double-edged sword. I have always professed that it is the responsibility of parents, a child's first teacher, to teach their children about their history and culture. The other side of that, are the parents conscious enough to do so?

Well, when the radio station stopped the flow of information coming to the community, freely, I guess the perpetrators felt that they had won, and had stopped the flow of Afrikan intellectual information. What they did not realize is that I am a warrior, and we are at war for control of our knowledge and consciousness. They stopped one venue, but not all. I started writing weekly historical and cultural articles for Black-owned newspapers, which I still do, but I had all of these films I used in my classes; now DVDs.

I said to myself, "Why not produce a film festival in the community, at a Black institution, and make it free?" I had produced other types of festivals over the years, so I had the expertise to do so. Compton College was the perfect place, plus it had a Black president, a black faculty, and a mostly Black student population. They jumped right on it and provided the facilities. They later told me it was the largest event ever held at the college. It was just an effort to get the information out to our community, simple as that.

The response was magnificent, as you stated. Our people are hungry for legitimate intellectual information, from our scholars and thinkers. We go to more films than any other group in America. It was a total Afrikan event. Black people controlled every aspect. If people were going to be there all day, then they had to eat. I had four Black-owned food establishments involved, and everyone, from the college to the public, were pleased. If there was any complaint at all, it was that it was not longer.

I asked the last two questions because I don't think it (African liberation radio program/film festival) has ever been done before, an African man in America hosting a weekend long session on African mental liberation on the radio, and secondly hosting a film festival on the same theme. To your knowledge, has any other person or organization done such a task before?

To be honest, I don't know of any, although there are film festivals going on all the time. It is just that the focus is different. I just hope it will inspire others to do the same thing. We are responsible for teaching ourselves our own knowledge, beginning with parents to children.

Based on your experience and knowledge, in the Western world one may call you a Renaissance man, but in the African context, you are a Diopian thinker and scholar, one who can fuse many disciplines to arrive at a truly African position, based on the results of detailed research, hence, as evident in your 1987 dissertation chapter on musical change via African American music to construct the first scholarly publication on rap/hip hop. In this context, how do you see yourself in relation to other African intellectual activists in the U.S. or anywhere on the planet?

Simply riding on the shoulders of those who came before us. I remember interviewing John Henrik Clarke one time, and he said at the end of the interview, "I pass the mantle to you." At the time, I didn't really take it seriously. I thought he was just saying that in passing. When he gave me the privilege of writing the last book on him, based on about seven or eight interviews I had conducted with him, then it became real. I have been trying to live up to that every since.

Thank you for this interview, and should you have any parting ideas or statements about your work, let me know, so our audience can gain additional insights.

The only parting things I can think of is that everything we do, outside of our families and our survival, has to be some effort to uplift Afrikan people. It doesn't matter what mode one takes. Don't try to save the world. Start with your own household. Conscioustize yourself and always be open to learn new things. A good teacher is always a good student. Realize that western civilization is not necessarily the answer for us. We had and have a culture, the best part of it, that is much more humane than what we now experience. And in the truest sense of regaining our Afrikan mentality, be aware of your morality, and actualize your spirituality.

For events and other things see: www.drkwaku.com