

The Global Presence of African Civilizations: An Interview with Runoko Rashidi

by

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Dr. Runoko Rashidi in Abuja, Nigeria (June 2011).

The following interview is published via the permission of JPAS editorial member and FeelNubia.com trustee Runoko Rashidi (runoko@yahoo.com) , conducted by Lola Balola for www.feelnubia.com in June 2011 in Abuja, Nigeria. Notwithstanding, he is a historian, research specialist, writer, world traveler, and public lecturer focusing on the African foundations of world civilizations.

Hence, he is particularly drawn to the African presence in Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands, and has coordinated numerous historic educational group tours worldwide. He is highly sought after for radio, television, and newspaper interviews, having been interviewed on hundreds of radio broadcasts and TV programs. He has made presentations at more than 125 colleges, universities, secondary schools, libraries, book stores, churches and community centers. On the international circuit he has lectured in over 50 countries. He is the author of the *Introduction to the Study of African Classical Civilizations*, *The Global African Community: The African Presence in Asia, Australia and the South Pacific* and his most recent work is titled *Black Star: The African Presence in Early Europe*. He edited, along with Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, *The African Presence in Early Asia*, considered "the most comprehensive volume on the subject yet produced". In December 2005 he released his first text in French titled *A Thousand Year History of the African Presence in Asia*. As an essayist and contributing writer, he has appeared in more than seventy-five publications (his historical essays have been featured in the *Journal of Civilizations Anthologies*, and cover the global African presence). Included among the notable African scholars that Runoko has worked with and been influenced by are: John Henrik Clarke, John G. Jackson, Yosef ben-Jochannan, Chancellor James Williams, Charles B. Copher, Edward Vivian Scobie, Ivan Van Sertima, Asa G. Hilliard III, Karen Ann Johnson, Obadele Williams, Charles S. Finch, James E. Brunson, Wayne B. Chandler, Legrand H. Clegg II, and Jan Carew. As a traveler, Runoko has visited one hundred countries, colonies and overseas territories in a twelve year period beginning in 1999. Dr. Rashidi believes that his main mission in life is to help make Africans proud of themselves, to help change the way Africa is viewed in the world and to help reunite a family of people that has been separated far too long.

Introduction

At the age of 18, African-American Runoko Rashidi discovered the African within him and became an advocate of Pan-Afrikanism, travelling the world documenting the ancient African diaspora in a quest now known as 'The Global African Presence'. Rashidi is an authority on the African presence in Asia, especially in the Phillipines and in India. He also teaches African-Americans to take pride in their African heritage. Visiting Nigeria recently, FeelNubia sat down with the eminent historian to learn why he has devoted his life to a voyage in search of Africa.

Unique Name

RR: Someone gave me that name when I was a student – 18 or 19 years old – I wanted to connect with Africa in a more comprehensive manner and so I decided to take on an African name. In America, we call the names on our passports, and our driver's licenses our 'Slave Name' and many of us have tried to address that. Some people take on Muslim names. They become Muslims, so they have a name like Rasheed – not Rashidi - Mohammed or Abdul. Other people for example in the Nation of Islam take on the name X. So you have people like Malcolm X but some of the rest of us have taken African names.

And my name is diverse: 'Runoko' is from Zimbabwe, 'Rashidi' is from Tanzania and I have a third name 'Okello', which is from Uganda. So that is another way of trying to connect with Africa. I mentioned yesterday, something I call part to my 'Stump speech', that I see myself as an African living in America.

Impressions of Nigeria

RR: This is my second visit to Nigeria. I have very positive impressions. This is the third conference I've attended [in Nigeria] in about three weeks. I'm very impressed. I'm impressed by the quality of scholarship, by the organization. Obviously people have spent a lot of money to put these together. People have been very kind to me. I've been treated like a VIP most of the time. I think that Nigeria has an undeserved bad reputation in the United States. People associate Nigeria with the epitome of corruption, but I've found it to be wonderful place. Nobody has tried to get me to engage in an internet scam, nobody's kidnapped me, and nobody's asked me for anything. I've enjoyed the food. I have been very impressed by the infrastructure. I think I've been to 27 or 28 countries in Africa now and I would place Nigeria at the top. So I'm very pleased. I'm glad to be here and I look forward to coming back again and again. I'd like to see more of the country. Well, it's difficult too, to get to know a country if you just sit in a conference all the time. So, I'd like to see a lot more of the real Nigeria but I'm glad I'm here.

"Reality Very Different From Perception"

RR: I guess... the thing that most struck me is the reality as opposed to the perception. Nigeria does not have a good reputation; I notice too that in the United States Nigeria doesn't promote tourism like Ghana, or Gambia or Senegal. So it surpassed all expectations. It has a rich history obviously. It is a very, very diverse country. Of course, it's important for me to like Nigeria because it's the biggest country in Africa – population-wise as you know, and it's the powerhouse of Africa or potentially the powerhouse of Africa – one of the powerhouses of the world. So coming here and having very good experiences has been very, very important. I think of myself as an ambassador of Africa, a researcher and an investigator and I want to be able to go back and tell the rest of the world, the United States, on Facebook, just what a wonderful country this has been for me and what a wonderful experience I've had. And I can see myself just promoting Nigeria and the Nigerian culture right now.

Searching the World for Africa

RR: The most common thread [found among Black people around the world] is in many ways, the worst. And that is, that wherever Black people are, wherever Africans are, they are always at the bottom of the social ladder – whether it's in South-East Asia, South-west Asia (the so-called Muslim world), throughout the Americas and I'm sad to say, in Africa too. When you go to North Africa: Egypt, Nubia, Morocco or Tunisia, Black people are at the bottom of the social ladder. And I also find it to be the case in so-called sub-Saharan Africa.

For example, if I were to go to Zimbabwe, Uganda or Namibia, I find the same thing: that although colonialism is formally over, White people - non Africans – control the economy and in many cases, cheat Africans as though they were still colonial subjects, like they are slaves. And that's very disheartening to me. So the common denominator – more than anything else, beyond phenotype - is the social categorization that finds Black people wherever they are in the world, at the bottom of the social ladder. I could find no exceptions. Politically and economically, we really suffer and that is where we find ourselves. And it's remarkable to me that it's not just the case in the west, but it's the case in Asia too. It's the case in the Pacific islands, where Black people really... it's not like we are powerless, but we don't have the power we should have.

Solutions to Africa's Problems

RR: We are a long way from coming to grips with [the problems]. And the question would be: How do we change our position in the world without taking on the attributes of those who oppress us? In other words I don't want to be a black white man, I don't want to take on the same characteristics as the people who have dominated us and at the same time I don't want the domination, so how can we get out of that whole reign without changing who we are? That to me will be replacing one tragedy with another. Again, in the United States, among so-called conscious Africans, we talk about white supremacy, we talk about Black people and white people but I find the same thing when it comes to interacting with the Asians. Most of my focus has been the presence in Asia.

How do we explain what happened to Black people in ancient China? Why is it that in Philippines, Black people are at the bottom of the social ladder? And there are no white people over there, these are Asians. How do we account for that? What is it about our culture, our personality that allows us to be dominated on such a global scale after such a long period of time? Same thing in the Arab world, I don't think we've really come to grips with it - we are trying to. We are not having these types of conferences among Black people in Asia, we have them in Africa – conferences by CBAAC (Centre for Black Arts and Civilization), the work of Panafstrag (Pan-African Strategy) and I guess even FeelNubia on different levels, but when it comes to African people in many other parts of the world that I have been to, what I find so intriguing is that we don't have black organizations per say, we don't have Pan-Africanist movements to address these issues and its interesting because I have not given it much thought until right now.



Runoko Rashidi (third to the right) with fellow FeelNubia board of trustee members (left to right) Niyi Coker, Jr., Ronke Babalola and Michelle Joseph.

Global Dialogue on the State of Black People

RR: I don't know of any discussions or conferences per say [that investigate the reasons why we are dominated all over the world]. I think the level of consciousness that African-Americans have and Africans on the continent is far in advance of other Black populations. For example in places like Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, in India, in South America... Black people are fighting for recognition as citizens in those countries. I mentioned Philippines; Black people are the first people in that part of the world and they are at the very, very bottom. [Yet] I don't know of any Black or Filipino organizations that are trying to address this. Among Aboriginal Australians (a place we have not really talked about yet), it's the same thing. In fact if I were to raise these issues on Facebook (where I spend a lot of time as you know), some people invariably (and I kick a lot of such people off my page) would say: "*Why are you even talking about Black people after all we are all human beings, we all live in the world together, what is this Black Stuff?*" I think there has been attempt to run away from our Black heritage and Black identity.

Black people themselves seem to be collaborators in that process. I am what might be called a Race Man; I believe in African identity, in our culture but that does not mean I hate anybody. I don't think our culture and identity should be submerged and yet I don't see an effort on the part of very many people to be aggressive in that regard. Does that make sense?

Consciousness of African Heritage Among Black People in Asia

RR: I haven't been to the Philippines; I hoped to go this year. This recession has really been ferocious, so maybe next year I will be able to begin to go back to Asia again. In China, things are very different. I think the Chinese government, maybe Chinese people generally would deny Black people existed in China.

One author I really learnt a lot from is a man known as Chancellor Williams in his book called *The Destruction of Black Civilization* where he talks about Nubia extensively, by the way. He says that at one time, there were so many Black people in China that they could form their own kingdom but what became of them? I have been to China but I can't find the evidence of Black people in the history of China – not in China, but you could read about it in books. India is somewhat different. In India there are different groups, it is very complex. You have the people for example called the Tamils who are Dravidians; who see themselves as separate and apart. They are clearly Black people but they don't necessarily see themselves as Africans. They would say that Africans and Tamils come from the same place so there's a common bond. Then you have socio-economically, the people called the *Dalits* or the *Untouchables*, most of whom are Black by the standards of race and ethnicity that we are used to dealing with. So I guess you could say that they are grappling with those issues... You have a lot of Black people in the so-called "middle east" ... There is going to be a conference (still being planned) in Bamako Mali, where there would be Black people from various parts of the middle east, from Palestine, probably the UAE, Africans from Iraq, Iran. If that happens that would probably be unique in history. So to answer your question, there are certain nascent efforts (in their infant stages) for Black people in these various parts of the world to come together and address those kinds of issues but up till this point, no, I haven't found any evidence of that.

Black Indian Writer V. T. Rajshekhar

RR: Yes he does see himself as Black. He's had a very difficult life. First of all he is a journalist; he is the editor of a publication called "Dalit Voice", sub-titled 'The voice for the persecuted nationality that's been denied human rights'. Rajshekhar is 79 years old now, so he's getting old. He's been a pioneering journalist and has been at the forefront of the Dalit Movement (the untouchables). Now one of the problems is that he's not a Dalit – not that they don't respect him, but a lot of the Dalits don't trust his motives. They don't see him as one of them, so this has been one of his problems. He's from what you might call a very, very low caste, next to the untouchables but not quite the untouchables. He is a very brave man. In December, I'm supposed to be presiding on a panel on the 'The Ancient Diaspora' in a conference in Senegal and I invited him to speak about Black people in India and I've invited a sister – an Aboriginal Australian, and a brother from Papua New Guinea.

So Rajshekhar is getting old and I don't know who else would be able to take his place. The Black Power movement (for lack of a better word) in India is growing and of course you have movements of the aboriginal Australians. We had a branch of the Garvey movement there; we had the Black Panther party movement there. Some Aboriginal Australians emulated some of the civil rights efforts we had in America. They had what they called *Freedom Rides* in Australia. In 1975, 1977 or both, there were Aboriginal Australians at the *FESTAC* (Festival of African Arts and Culture). Rajshekhar has been a pioneer. He's had a very difficult life.

His life has been threatened, he's been beaten, he's been jailed, his passport was impounded for several years so he couldn't engage in international travel because he's really spoken out - maybe more than anybody in modern times - in terms of Black interest in India. There are certainly people who are very active [working in this area] but he's the one I've worked with and have known. He's the one I personally know. There are young leaders in India but I just don't have the contacts with them.

Threatened in Asia

RR: I've been threatened in India because I spoke against un-touchability. I have been told that if I were to come back, that I would be assassinated, that I would likely be incarcerated. So, my contact with India over the years has been diminished. The last contact I had with India was in 1999. I talked about the need for solidarity between Black people all over the world. That is something that our enemies do not want. They are afraid [of global African unity] and that is why you have this gap between the Africans in America and Africans all over the continent.

Re-building the Bridge Between Black People

RR: I think that they [White supremacists] have realized that the unity of Black people around the world will definitely overwhelm White supremacy and it would mean the end effectively of European domination in Africa - particularly the economic domination, which would mean the end of White world supremacy. They understand that. So they have gone to great lengths – and they have been largely successful - at creating a wedge between Africans in the diaspora and Africans on the continent. And I would like to think that me being here at this conference is part of the process of rebuilding that bridge. It is essential that the bridge be re-constructed because that will usher in a whole new era in world history. In spite of all the problems that we confront, it's exciting being a part of that process - that rebuilding process. When my ancestors were taken away from Africa hundreds of years ago, who would have thought that we would eventually come back? When we were taken out of that *Door of No Return*, who would have thought that there would come a time when we would begin to go back to Africa and embrace Africa? I think that represents in a sense, the triumph of the will of African people and I am very proud of that.



Lola Balola of FeelNubia with Runoko Rashidi

Educating African Americans About Africa

RR: It's slow but it's rewarding. You can see we are making progress. I'm just a very small part of that but the very fact that now we call ourselves African-Americans, not Negroes, not colored, not just Black, not Afro-Americans but African-Americans, represents the acknowledgement of whom we are and where we come from. You can see other things, things that some other people would consider very small. For example; many African-Americans use African names: Kobe, Jamal, something to that effect. People aren't as ashamed anymore about wearing natural hairstyles; people aren't ashamed anymore – at least, not to the extent that they once were - about wearing traditional African clothes. So these things are important manifestations of us getting closer to Africa. You have more and more sisters and brothers travelling to Africa now. They go to Egypt; they go to Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya. Hopefully more and more, they'll be going to Nigeria. So little by little, you can see that we're making progress. Sometimes it's difficult to see that you are making progress when you are right in the middle of it, but if you are able to stand back, then you can see some things that give one cause for a lot of encouragement.

Inspired by Marcus Garvey

RR: Garvey was from Jamaica. And Garvey at least up until the time of Kwame Nkrumah, was undoubtedly one of the greatest Pan-Africanists. When I say Pan-Africanist, I mean someone who talked about the unity of African people all over the world. He would have said (although he didn't say) the statement I used in my presentation yesterday and that is, that: "*You're not an African because you were born in Africa. You're an African because Africa was born in you*". Garvey popularized the expression "*Africa for the Africans - those at home and those abroad*".

Here's a man who never went Africa, never set foot on African soil, didn't even have an African name, who never wore an African shirt that I'm aware of, but he loved Africa with every fiber of his being, every core of his body and he dreamed of a united continental African union. That is something that inspires me today. Garvey organized in Europe and around the world, 6 – 12 million people – without radio, without TV, without the internet and at a time when things were much more difficult, much more overtly difficult than we have now. And his belief was that no matter where we are around the world, Africa must be our banner and everything we do has to be about the ultimate liberation of Africa. Garvey was born in Jamaica, in the West Indies. Someone asked him once: "*Are you an African or are you a Jamaican?*" And his answer was: "*I will not give up a continent for an Island*". And that's what I want people to see. I love Marcus Garvey and I love the spirit of Marcus Garvey.

Africa and the Diaspora

Now, when people define Diaspora, they look at it in different ways. Most people think of Africans who left Africa relatively recently for economic or political reasons. At least that is the definition of the African Union. Most of us, when we think of the Diaspora, we think of Black people who were taken away as a result of enslavement and so we are trying to expand that. Africans in America need to feel love from Africa. And most of us don't feel that. It is important to find ways to connect Africa with its diverse Diaspora.

Vision for Africa

RR: My vision is a communal African Union with a leadership that's accountable to the masses of our people; I don't think that African leadership, in the United States, in Africa or anywhere else is in general accountable to the people. They seem to be in it for their own self interest. We need a leadership, a union where the vast mineral resources are used first and foremost (not necessarily exclusively) with the interest of Africa in mind. There's a Reggae song that goes "*Africa is the richest place with the poorest race, oh my, oh my, what a disgrace*". We have this fabulously wealthy continent and yet I'm staying in an expensive hotel and the electricity goes off every hour. How can that be? We have gold and diamond and copper and rubber, cobalt and titanium – you name it. Yet African people are so poor that they flee Africa, to Europe, they go to the United States, Canada, anywhere just to get out of Africa in search of a better life economically. That's a sin. That's a crime. It shouldn't be that way. It doesn't have to be that way. Africa does not have to be that way. So my dream, my vision is for a continental African Union where the vast resources of Africa are used first and foremost for Africans, for the leadership to be accountable to the masses of the African people and to be a place where Africans around the world have citizenship in that union. I do not believe that we should have to apply for a Tourist visa to come to Africa. I think Africa should be our birth-right. To show up at the airport, to be able to live in Africa, to have a home in Africa.

Why shouldn't I have a home in Los Angeles and a home in Nigeria at the same time? And to me, that is part of what the reparations process should be about. Not necessarily getting a lot of money, but the return of our birth-right. So that is my dream. That is my vision. That is my ultimate goal and ambition in life.

Reparations

I would like to see Africa's foreign debt relieved. I would like to see Africans and African-Americans have free university tuition. I would like to see greater emphasis placed on the elimination of AIDS and Malaria. I believe in Reparations but the problem I have with Reparations is how to enforce it. If it's an issue of morality, it would have been paid a long time ago. It's not an issue of right or wrong. It's not even an issue of legality. That's been demonstrated. The issue is: what kind of stick, what kind of mechanism do we use to make Europe and America pay? Because they're not going to do it because it's the right thing to do, they're going to do it because they're forced to do it and I don't see African people right now with a stick to beat these people over the head – these foreign Corporations - and make them pay. Unfortunately, we are not organized. A lot of people, even African-Americans believe: "*Why should they pay Reparations?*" We have a lot of work to do, as you know. We have a lot of educating to do. So that's what I'm about. I'm about slowly, painstakingly trying to give us a new-found sense of pride in our African heritage. I am a living example of that. There was a time when I was ashamed of Africa too; I didn't want to have anything to do with Africa. And now, I'm just the opposite of that. Malcolm X is an example of that. He's said in his auto-biography that he was a pimp, a burglar and a thief and then he began to find out about who he was and it changed everything. I think the motto is: '*What you do for yourself depends on what you think of yourself. What you think of yourself depends on what you know of yourself. And what you know of yourself depends on what you have been told*'. So if you're told you come from the jungle, if you're told you come from a bunch of savages, barbarians, people who have no civilization, no history, you'll act that out. But if you know you come from the continent that gave birth to humanity and civilization and that slavery did exist but that we fought it and we resisted it, I think that changes everything. You'll have a new found sense of pride and you'll want to identify with Africa. When somebody attacks Africa, you'll fight because you'll know they are attacking your mother, they are attacking your heritage and you won't have that. But if you don't see that connection, then we're just doomed to wander in the wilderness and that can't be our fate.

Making Change Happen

RR: It's true that some people will not join the effort until we demonstrate something but we need to have a critical mass. It can't just be a handful of people. It can't be just Jesus and the eleven disciples. You need a critical mass of people in order to make a change; we have to continue to work for that. Educate ourselves, as many people as we can but you can't divorce yourself from the masses of people, you have to have organization, it's unavoidable.

Africa Embracing Black People

RR: We can't have the perception (and this may sound arrogant, but I'm going to be honest with you) that Africans on the continent see Africans in the diaspora as mere credit cards and wallets. We have to see a genuine kind of love coming from the African people, but I don't see that right now. I'm glad I'm in Africa and I do feel a certain degree of love but I don't really see that coming from African governments. Continental Africans don't relate with African-Americans but it's a two-way street because African-Americans in general show contempt for Africans. So Africans on the continent say: "*Why should I interact with a group of people who don't want to be identified as Africans anyway? Let them go*". So it's a two-way street, so education has to take place on both sides. Right now, I think we have to accelerate the pace of that education. It's slow. Africans on the continent need more education about African-Americans too. That we don't all do drugs, that we are not all violent or disrespectful of our women.

President Obama's Role in African-Americans Embracing Africa

RR: I had hoped, many of us hoped (but I think some of that hope is beginning to fade now) that with the Barack Obama Presidency, Africa would become cool again. That people would say: "*Oh yeah, Africa's not such a bad place after all. Look at our President, he's from Africa*" but that hasn't happened. I think that President Barack Obama (who I love very much by the way) needs to reach out more to Africa. I think these White people that they're trying to make happy are never going to accept him for the most part, no matter what he does, no matter what he says, in many cases, he's always going to be a [Black man] to them - I don't know of the White world, but the majority of the White people in the United States. No matter what he does, most White people will never truly accept him as one of them and if that's the case, he might as well just go for it. He might as well just be honest and be a man of conviction. I would love for him to come and spend more time in Africa. Of course he came to Ghana the one time and he came to Egypt for a brief period, but imagine if he went back to Kenya? Imagine if he came and did some sightseeing in Nigeria? People would go crazy. I think among African-Americans, that would rekindle the fire and the enthusiasm that many of us had a year and a half ago that we've lost. It's like what he got to lose?

Legacy

RR: I would like to be written on my epitaph: 'The greatest historian ever'. I've thought about it a lot over the years, I want to be regarded as the greatest historian that ever lived. I want people to mention my name in the same breath as people like John Henry Clark and Chancellor Williams and others. I want people to say that he was a great African, that he was a lover of Africa and that would be quite enough.