

Askia Muhammad Touré: Early Pioneer in Black Studies

by

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Askia M. Toure' is a veteran poet, writer, editor and Black liberation activist. In the 1960s he was active in RAM, SNCC, and was a co-founder with Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal of the Black Arts Cultural Revolution. In SNCC, he was a co-author of the 1966 "Black Power Position Paper," which was featured in *The New York Times*. He led the transformation of SNCC from Civil Rights into a Black Power organization chaired by Stokeley Carmichael (Kwame Toure). He is also an internationally published poet and the author of eight books including "*From the Pyramids to the Projects*," which won the 1989 American Book Award for Literature. In 2003, his Nile Valley epic, "*Dawn-Song!*" won the Stephen Henderson Poetry Award given by the African-American Literature and Culture Society. In 1967, he joined poets Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez, and Dr. Nathan Hare in creating the very first Africana Studies program at a major university at San Francisco State. He has worked with Dr.

Asa G. Hilliard III, Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, and others in 1984 organizing the first Nile Valley Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1985, they brought the legendary historian, anthropologist, and physicist Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal to the United States. Askia has continued to work on Black Human Rights projects throughout the United States. He has read his poetry and spoken at writer's conferences in the U.S., at the University of Havana in Cuba and in Guyana, South America. He is also a green environmental activist.

The following interview between Askia M. Toure' and *JPAS* editor Itibari M. Zulu was initiated incited June 29, 2012 and completed August 21, 2012.

IMZ: First, thank you for this interview.

AMT: Thank you, Brother Itibari. The pleasure is mine.

IMZ: I know that your accomplishments are many, and that in general, they are all geared toward raising the consciousness and productive work of particularly the African world community. In that context, I would like you to go back in time to the beginnings of Black Studies at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) when you were invited to participate in the building of what today has become ‘Africana Studies’. What was the nature of the environment, and why did you accept the invitation?

AMT: First, I’d like to point out that as an activist; I was involved in developing independent Black educational institutions. Dr. Muhammad Ahmed (aka Max Stanford) and I taught in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom School in Greenwood, Mississippi when we were there in Spring, 1964. Later, in 1966, I was a member of SNCC’s Atlanta Project [where we wrote the 1966 SNCC Black Power Position Paper, with project director, William Ware, writer-activist Donald Stone and me.] Stone, my former wife, Aisha, SNCC leader, Bill Mahoney, activist Karen Spelman, and I developed an Atlanta Freedom School at a local community Jazz club. The progressive Black businessman who owned the club, allowed us to run the school daily, rent-free. The white “City of Atlanta” put pressure on him, and threatened to cut off his power, and revoke his commercial business license, unless we closed. Additionally, white, under-cover policemen began to terrorize local customers at a nearby bar, a block away. We closed down, and attempted to re locate to a church.

In the middle of that struggle, I received a phone call from my friend and fellow poet, Sonia Sanchez, who was leading a similar project with SNCC activist Jimmy Garrett, in San Francisco. Sonia proposed that Aisha and I join her, Garrett and others in a more progressive urban climate. We agreed and came out there in early 1967.

IMZ: Upon your arrival and your subsequent teaching assignment San Francisco State College, what were some of your expectations and eventual disappointments (if any)?

AMT: Frankly, I was quite surprised that San Francisco State College accepted the terms of Sonia, Jimmy Garrett, and the Black student leadership, and allowed our program on campus (of course, strategic demonstrations by the Black student body, which threatened to shut-down the campus, certainly convinced them). Basically what we did was bring our original, community-based classes onto SF State’s campus—led by grassroots community people, who were our dedicated students (I often compared it to Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Satchel Page, and the old Negro Leagues stars entering “official” white American baseball).

IMZ: During the struggle for Black Studies at San Francisco State a number of leaders sprang forth, namely Jimmy Garrett and of course Nathan Hare. In this process, what was the leadership style (i.e., people-centered, elitist, ideological, etc.) of those most identified as ‘leaders’, and if they were successful in their efforts, what do you consider the most essential elements in their success?

AMT: A key aspect of the methodology of our program was a people-centered, non-elitist approach, which emerged from SNCC, the Black Arts, and the massive Civil Rights/Black Power movement. We saw ourselves as not only teachers, but as griots transmitting the truths of our history, traditions and culture, but also helping to develop the character, vision and self-discipline of future leaders. This meant that we, the teachers must be able to “walk the walk,” as well as “talk the talk.” Fortunately, we had the living example of our dedicated, radical leader, Dr. Nathan Hare. We made it clear that it was important that they learn to have disciplined, independent minds, and be able to take leadership, if the situation demanded it. We also tried to structure “Call and Response,” or constant Dialogue as an ongoing component of our methodology. We attempted to learn from, as well as teach these young leaders—and in Jimmy Garrett, Danny Glover, George Murray and peers, we had a fine group of future leaders.

IMZ: In your 2002 interview with Joyce A. Joyce you mentioned that in 1964 Black kids had been deeply scarred by colonialism and self-hate. Should we move forward in time, we would assume that such colonialism and self-hate is a thing of the past, but in 2010, *CNN* commissioned a study which found that Black kids still have problems with their identity and self-worth. In light of the original mission and aims of Black Studies as a place that would examine the problems of the domestic Black community and thus offer solutions or alternatives to those problems, in addition to the obvious academic mission and aims, how can the establishment of Black Studies and or Africana Studies be evaluated presently?

AMT: Brother Itibari, I’ll try to be as precise as possible here. In Dr. Joyce’s interview, I alluded to my time in ’64, in SNCC’s Greenwood, Mississippi Freedom-school. The children I spoke of were those of rural share-croppers and Mississippi peasants. While working in San Francisco, and later, in Harlem, I found children of the Black urban working-class to be more aggressive, aspiring, and confident. However, that was later, in the midst of the massive upsurge, in the mid to late ‘60s, which climaxed in the urban rebellions of the “Long, Hot Summers,” when the Black masses arose and actually fought for liberation, seizing major cities and battling U.S. military forces. As for today’s situation, this is the period of the second post-Reconstruction, as Manning Marable described it. The Corporate State, the Empire counter-attacked with the Drug Plague, the militarization of the police (SWAT), and the emergence of the Prison-Industrial Complex. It’s painful to state that the counter-offensive also involved the “co-optation of Black Studies,” replacing its original strategies, and leadership, with neo-colonial scholars and rank opportunists.

As for the original Black/Africana Studies-- led by Nathan Hare, John Henrik Clark, Jacob Carruthers, John Bracey, Carolyn Fowler, Vincent Harding, Stephen E. Henderson and others-- the aim was to build Movement, leadership, liberation scholar/griots, whose task was to lead our people to ultimate self-determination in this country. In my opinion, these patriotic scholars were eventually replaced by two groups: African-American assimilationists and/or African or Caribbean “compradors,” devoid of a spiritual/ethnic/Pan African connection to the children of the urban working-class or middle-class of the majority African-American nationality! A younger, dynamic peer of the late Addison Gayle, Jr., Dr. Houston A. Baker, alludes to this “sell-out” of the original Black Studies vision and scholarship, in his courageous volume, *“Betrayal, How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era.”*

IMZ: The arts have played an important role in the beginning of Black Studies, yet I think few know of that history or perhaps few are willing to credit it, to instead favor a fictional account of the origins as a gathering of documents and materials on the experience of Black people in the U.S., absent of cultural performance or as some say, a cultural grounding. Do you think such an assessment is fair, and or correct?

AMT: I agree with your analysis, in that many of our original activists/scholars were artists-activists. For example, John H. Clarke was a talented short story writer, poet and editor [of *“Freedom-ways”* journal]; as was historian, and *“Ebony”* magazine editor Lerone Bennett (who published stories in *“Umbra”* journal). Larry Neal, poet, dramatist, and critic was an editor for the *“Liberator.”* Dr. Sarah W. Fabio was a gifted poet, while teaching Huey P. Newton at Oakland’s Merritt College. Dr. Carolyn Fowler, historian, was a pioneering essayist, literary critic, and assoc. editor with Hoyt W. Fuller at *“Negro Digest/Black World.”* Cultural historian, Harold W. Cruse was a literary and drama critic, before his famous *“The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual.”* And, last, but not least, Dr. Stephen Henderson was an out-standing Blues/Jazz scholar, literary theorist, and organizer of a series of “National Black Writers Conferences” at Howard University in the 1970s which anchored and consolidated the Black Arts Cultural Revolution as a new U.S. paradigm.

IMZ: Back to your interview with Joyce A. Joyce, you mentioned that White faculty had to be present in the Black Studies classes to supervise, which you reasoned as ‘an example of colonialism’. How did that work, I am sure there were areas of conflicts, for example, as you mentioned, ‘spies’ in the class from the administration?

AMT: Part of the conditions under which we were to teach, were that white professors had to be present in our classrooms in a “supervisory” capacity. I really can’t be more specific here, because I was fortunate to have the faculty rebel, a white, anti-Vietnam war activist [whom the Humanities department chairman, Dr. Raymond Kelch (a friend of then Gov. Ronald Reagan) called “A traitor to your race!”] My rebellious faculty “supervisor” said, “Hey, man, go for it— and good luck!” He then left the class. However, a few days after he left, these tall, blond men and women began to “monitor” my class.

They refused to sign the attendance paper, claiming that they were “observers”. As we got deeper into the course; we explored the Egyptian’s seminal contributions to math, science, medicine, astronomy, architecture, engineering, monumental sculpture, art, music, etc. We also explored Greek historians, Herodotus and Diodorus’ descriptions of the Africans as “black-complexioned, kinky-haired Ethiopians” (I discovered later that SF State’s white Anthropology professors routinely described them as “Semitic Orientals,” and that all Blacks were described as “foreigners and/or slaves”). As we advanced our course from this indigenous Nile Valley perspective, we explored the pyramids and monumental temples as humanity’s largest, most gigantic buildings and vast metropolitan areas, our tall, blond monitors became red-faced with astonished embarrassment, and quickly removed them-selves permanently from my classroom.

Finally, when we first came on campus, a group of liberal, white faculty would follow us around the campus, like we were “rock stars”! After our classes, we’d meet at campus restaurants and “watering holes” for discussions, reports, intellectual debates, etc. They would sit close-by, in hearing distance. They would listen intently. They “hung on our every word.” I remember colleagues saying that they seemed to be “sucking up our Black ‘Soul’! Frankly, it was a living comment on U.S. apartheid society. Probably, from their perspective, here were their Black “counter-parts,” these brilliant, proud, charismatic rebels who brought radical, new vision to the Anglo-dominated campuses. In fact, many were deeply curious about us—as scholars and radical intellectuals. “Word” had reached them from the Grapevine that we were Civil Rights/Black Power activists from SNCC, CORE, RAM; and that we were fresh from the battle-fields of struggle in the Deep South, and from explosive battle-fields of the northern urban ghettos. After I had departed back to Harlem, I heard indeed that Sonia Sanchez had worked with some of the progressive women writers and helped developed solidarity among campus progressives.

IMZ: I like your idea of dual institution building on campus and in the community in case ‘Africana Studies’ is outlawed, because based on the history of the U.S. with even something as simple as ‘Affirmative Action’, there are problems as the U.S. Supreme Court debates the inclusion of race as a factor to increase the admission rates of under representation people, namely people who are not ‘White’ (Fisher v. University of Texas, No.11-345). Have you recently done some work around this idea, and if not, are you aware of where it is being done?

AMT: When I was a member of SNCC’s Atlanta Project (1966/early ’67), I had the pleasure of speaking and working with Dr. Vincent Harding, who taught at Spelman College, and was also active in developing the “Institute of the Black World.” This was Dr. Harding’s view, and it was also that of Dr. John Henrik Clarke, and Dr. Ben Jochannan in Harlem. One of the major proponents of this view was the late scholar and leader, Dr. Jacob Carruthers, founding director of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC). Dr. Carruthers taught at the Center for Inner City Studies at Northeastern Illinois University. He and his long-time colleague, Prof. Anderson Thompson definitely embodied this view.

As a matter of fact, Dr. Carruthers authored a brilliant volume of historical, cultural and political essays titled, *“Intellectual Warfare,”* published in 1999 by Third World Press. I view this collection as an overview of what we face in this second post-Reconstruction, and an outline for the direction in which we must travel in our struggle to liberate the thinking of our scholars and future leaders, if we’re to survive the coming wave of corporate fascism which seeks to re-install a modern form of slavery upon the African-American people in this era.

IMZ: Thank you again for this interview. Are there any final thoughts, ideas or announcements you would like to leave with our readers?

AMT: Despite the brilliant scholarly work of Michele Alexander, Isobel Wilkinson, Houston Baker, Robin D.G. Kelley, and a host of brilliant thinkers, we face the future with a de-intellectualized people, chasing a coterie of assimilated celebs while our mass and activist groups fragment without clear goals, or the vision to build liberation formations and a massive liberation movement like we had “back in the day” (1960s/70s). We had better move to re-structure our intellectual vision, consolidate our formations, or face a dreadful future. It would be a shame that, after two centuries of massive struggle, on all fronts, to allow compradors, opportunists, and confused assimilationists to mislead us into a second MAAFA. I believe in the wholesome sincerity of our people, and their unrelenting mass activism in the Occupy Movement, the struggle for Trayvon Martin, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Rock the Vote, and other aspects of their sincerity, integrity and youthful energies. However, we must regain our vision of unrelenting struggle, with serious goals and strategies if we’re to avoid the consolidation of corporate fascism, and the American gulags to come! As the London Olympics have shown, we Africans, of all nations, played a dominating role in the athletic championships. Why not in world politics, economics, and liberating culture? As Mama Harriet Tubman said, she freed a thousand slaves in her abolitionist struggle. She said that she would’ve freed a thousand more, if they had only realized that they were slaves. As for recent experience with independent educational formations, for the last decade, I’ve worked in Boston with Prof. Tony Menelik Van Der Meer, his wife Clemencia, in developing the Cultural Café, an independent cultural/educational formation designed to educate Black people via seminars, films, work-shops, lectures and visiting speakers. I also work with his colleague, Dr. NTeri Nelson in Boston ASCAC and Nile Valley studies. In our seminars, scholars, such as Sonia Sanchez, Joyce A. Joyce, Sam Anderson, Rose-Mari Mealy, Ed Bullins, Amiri Baraka, Marvin X and others have lectured and performed their art. So, in the words of our late Elder, Queen Mother Audley Moore, “our struggle continues.”