

Dr. Ben in His Own Words

by

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Herb Boyd is an awarding winning author and journalist and has published 22 books and countless articles for national magazines and newspapers. He is co-editor (with Robert Allen) of *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America: An Anthology* which won the American Book Award (1995) for nonfiction. In 1999, he won three first place awards from the New York Association of Black Journalists for his articles published in the *Amsterdam News*. Boyd is also national and international correspondent for Free Speech TV, a graduate of Wayne State University in Detroit, a teacher of African and African-American history at the College of New Rochelle in the Bronx, and an adjunct lecturer at City College of New York (City University of New York) in the Black Studies Department.



Toward the front of the headquarters of the National Action Network in Harlem, there is a chair—no, a throne—that was placed there for the venerable Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan (photo to left by Solwazi Afi Olusola). Every Saturday for more than a decade, “Dr. Ben,” as he was affectionately and internationally known, would arrive there and take his place as part of the audience, primarily to hear the Rev. Al Sharpton.

“Dr. Ben came each week knowing I was going to preach about Jesus,” Sharpton said last Saturday during NAN’s action rally. “He told me he came despite what I believed, often saying, ‘I raised that boy, but he went off on some other things.’ He came to our rallies because he had a habit of being around Black people.”

Sharpton said that chair, which no one is allowed to sit in, now with only a picture of Jochannan in the seat, “will be there as long as this organization exists. He taught us more about our history and culture than any other Black scholar.”

A week after his death [March 19, 2015], a multitude of associates, colleagues, students and well-wishers have extended their condolences, shared their grief and sorrow and voiced their appreciation for his many years of scholarship, particularly to Kemet studies, also known as Egyptology. Among his many books are “Africa: The Mother of Civilization” and “Black Man of the Nile,” both currently in print by Black Classic Press.

Capturing the essence of historian Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan, whose life stretched across nearly a century, more than matching the reach and influence of his scholarship, is not easy. His passing Thursday morning leaves an immeasurable chasm in the world of Kemet studies. Perhaps the best way to present some idea of his majesty and what he has meant to a community of teachers, scholars and students is if we allow him here to speak for himself from a portion of his vast library of essays, lectures and interviews.

One of the reasons to resort to his own autobiographical reflections is the absence of his writings among other scholars. It is futile to search for his presence in the books of John Jackson, St. Clair Drake, Ivan Van Sertima, Drusilla Dunjee Houston, Molefi Asante, Joseph Harris, Ali Mazrui and other notable scholars in fields related to his studies. He is missing also from works by Wayne Chandler and Cheikh Anta Diop, and even in Dr. John Henrik Clarke’s monumental book “African World Revolution,” Jochannan is not mentioned.

Seemingly, Jochannan was best known and respected among those who attended his lectures, whether in the classroom or in the streets. Fortunately, from the London lectures, he conducted with Clarke in 1986, collected in “New Dimensions in African History” (Africa World Press), we can begin tracing his biographical trail, one that begins in a literary way in 1938.

“In 1938, I published my first book on Africa,” he said, answering an audience member interested in knowing what he had done to alleviate some of the stresses Blacks had endured under colonialism. “Since 1938, I’ve published 32 books on Africa, and I write them in such a way that even a seventh-grader should be able to read them. I also have 14 other manuscripts and an encyclopedia of seven volumes. I established my own publishing company. We send books to jails, hospitals and certain places, free to African-Americans, African and African-Caribbean prisoners.”

Jochannan then elaborated on a bit of his teaching at that time. “I teach right now at a school called Malcolm-King College and for the last 18 years consecutively on a voluntary basis every Thursday night in the Harlem community. I go to Head Start programs in eight public schools, at no charge, to lecture very young brothers and sisters. I frequent a place called Pan-Pan Restaurant, near the corner of West 135th Street, where I live. ... If you ask me personally, I was a civil engineer.

I worked for many projects and for many people without charge, and as a lawyer I have taken numerous cases when I was a legal practitioner for free. I have trained my children so that one of my daughters works as a physician in a clinic only two days a week for her own pocket, and then four days for the people of Puerto Rico, with one day free.”

When Jochannan was asked about the slave trade, he used it as an opportunity to expound on his own lineage. “My father was married to my mother after his first wife died,” he began. “My grandfather, my father’s father, had 63 children with 11 wives. So I know what polygamy is against promiscuity. ... I have nine biological daughters, three sons and eight adopted daughters, making a total of 20 children. I wish I could get more, because I’m an African, and I have no qualms about having a little tiny minuscule family called the modern family. I told my daughters there is nothing wrong with polygamy. You want to marry a man with five wives, OK, but you must be a wife by the marriage tradition of the land.

“There are reasons why I say I’ve got to have an African woman,” he continued. “I’ve got to have somebody who understands me culturally. Because the European men keep their wives as a piece of furniture in the house, and she’s got to rebel against him, as she is competing against tennis balls, golf balls and skiing down the Alps. The African woman has always had to work, and there is no fear of the African woman taking over her man. They will never do that. They are always ahead of the men, and we want them there.”

On the question of love and respect, Jochannan said, “I don’t care if my woman doesn’t love me as long as she respects me. Respect is higher than love. Love is an animalistic thing that you have no control of. I must live the life before I can preach it. I have been married to an ex-Roman Catholic nun, a Black woman and all the Jewish people on my side also said it couldn’t survive, and yet we have been married for 39 years because I respect her. I have so much time to praise and worship Black women, to kneel down and thank the heavens they are here!”

And while he kneels in reverence to Black women, we extend our praise and gratitude for his contribution, which, as Sharpton observed, “we can all make, no matter our differences.”