

**Some Notes on Our Africanist/African Past:
The Birth and Early Years of UFAHAMU**

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My being invited, as part of this final print issue of *Ufahamu*, to reconstruct the foundation and histories of *Ufahamu* and the African Activist Association (AAA) has given me an opportunity to engage not only in the politics of memory, but also to develop my own reassessment of the journal and its founding organization, AAA. From within my own current intellectual, academic, and political milieu, this memory exercise can only be explored in the spirit of both modernist and postcolonial thought because both of these entities (the journal and its activist wing) are modernist creations, emerging from a combination of identity politics, cultural revivalism/revolution, Pan-Africanism, and the revolutionary spirit (Marxist and nationalist) on the African continent in the 1960s. The radical entities of the AAA and the *Ufahamu* emerged from the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid activism that permeated not only the African continent and much of what was to be called the "Third World," but also the activism and thought of Africans, African Americans/Blacks, and progressive whites in this country. Perhaps nowhere in the U.S. and Europe was this atmosphere more manifested than on large urban campuses such as UCLA. It was the peak of a ferment that was to continue to drive the civil rights movements, to bring into being Black Studies programs and other ethnic studies programs, and to stir people's minds and hearts in a hopeful way. It was a very exciting time to be in African Studies.

It was also a very difficult time as various groups jostled for power within the academy and community, just as groups the world over were struggling with one another. From the vantage point of being an M.A. student in African Studies, a founding member and officer in AAA, and a founding editor of *Ufahamu*, and with hindsight, I am able to critique the race, class, and gender politics of that experience. I am also viewing matters from the positionality of a white woman now a middle-class academic (full professor in Anthropology and Women's Studies at UCLA), but from a working-class background, a neo-Marx postcolonialist feminist whose activism and research are still inseparable from race, class, and gender politics. Therefore, I have and I have not strayed from the vision of the original AAA and *Ufahamu*. I am, however, much more prone to deconstruct some of the categorical assumptions, some of the identity categories, and much more willing to see the ambivalence in the colonial/colonized relationship, to name only one of the dichotomies I am actively involved in subverting. I am now more willing to critique the state—any state—in its relationship to its citizens, especially to women. And I am totally critical of all forms of nationalism—whether African, African American, or any other kind of nationalism. With these less categorical politics, would I have been elected to office within the AAA or elected to the journal's board today by the same peers of the 1960s? Probably not. Within the Black milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, what I had in my favor was my total commitment to undermining white hegemony. (I am as firm in my research and activism in this area as ever before.) But would my total commitment to undermining patriarchal hegemony make me electable in that same situation? As well as class hegemony? No. The original vision

of the AAA and *Ufahamu* was all about the politics of representation. Race was the central variable in the struggle.

The AAA came into being in 1968, spurred on by the injustices in South Africa, inspired by the guerilla victories in Guinea-Bissau and other anti-colonial struggles in Portuguese colonies, lured by the charisma of magnificent African leaders and thinkers such as Eduardo Mondlane, Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba, Nelson Mandela, and many others. We were inspired by the Algerian war of liberation, by Nassar and Nkrumah, and many others, and moved by writers such as Chinua Achebe. In so many ways it was the heyday of African Studies and of Africa. Things had not begun to fall apart. We were the young hopefuls. But we were also the young skeptics. We convinced ourselves that in order to be effective in helping with the "African revolution," we needed to look at our own institutions, not just the U.S. government and corporate power that was upholding such wicked regimes as the South African apartheid regime, but our own academic institutions with their underlying (and sometimes blatant) racism.

These radical 1960's were a time when people were questioning and attempting to deconstruct the existing social and political systems. Nothing was easy. We struggled over everything in those years. UCLA Africanist students at the time were questioning why the African Studies program was so white, not just at UCLA but across the U.S. as well, reflected in our national academic organization, the African Studies Association. There were too few African or African-American students represented in most African studies programs nationally. A group of radicalized students at UCLA started making demands with regards to diversity issues in African Studies

at UCLA. In 1968, as tensions built up, Leo Kuper, the director of the African Studies Center at the time, decided that a student group should be formed so that students could channel their political efforts. Approximately seventeen students became a part of this appointed group, which remained nameless for a while (I was one of the designated "student representatives"). There was a lot of dissention and resentment from other students about the group because it had been appointed *sui generis* by the director rather than emerging organically from the perceived needs and goals of the students themselves. From within the group we challenged our own legitimacy and began to deconstruct the incipient organization. The formation of the group was seen as an attempt on the part of faculty and African Studies Center (ASC) administration to diffuse the growing tensions rather than confront the issues. The group began to evolve into something else, an entity that tried to set itself apart from the administration of the ASC. Eventually, after endless meetings just to select a name, we became the Africanist Activist Association. Some of the original founding members were Salih El-Arifi (Sudanese), Renee Poussaint, Robert Cummings, Joy Stewart, Fritz Pointer, Allen Thurm, Adolfo Mascarenhas (Tanzanian), and myself.

The AAA became very active and worked tirelessly in its early beginnings. We often had three hour meetings twice a week. One of the major issues we worked on was diversity in African Studies. The time was ripe for us to make ourselves visible at the African Studies Association, which was holding its annual meeting in Montreal in 1968. At those meetings a group of African, African-American, and radical white students seized the podium—literally and metaphorically—and demanded an end to the domination of African Studies by what was seen as an

all white, conservative, and often racist establishment. We students had been stirred by some widely distributed popular political writings that convincingly linked academic institutions, African Studies Centers, corporate funding, the U.S. government, and various intelligence apparatuses. Among these radical students who "stormed the barricades" at Montreal were African Studies and Africanist students from UCLA. Those students reported back to the AAA on the events of the Montreal ASA meeting, which provoked the students of the organization and reinforced their drive to change the existing order of things, by any means necessary. We argued that we should start with our own house. This was not an idea that was popular with everyone. The membership was large at this time (some 40-50 students), but a number of members left because of the race talk. Some white students, especially those from the disciplines (geography, for example) said they were "insulted" by the name of the organization (they wanted a more scholarly-sounding name). One said that being a member of an organization named AAA would hurt his academic career, would make him seem less serious, etc. Eventually, some students dropped out—mainly white male students—offended by any suggestions that there should be "affirmative action" taken to recruit more African/Black students into graduate school, by talk of demanding special concessions to fund them, and by measures taken to keep the control of AAA in the hands of Black and African students. After Montreal there seemed to be a clear path—the AAA would be run by Africans and U.S. Blacks (the same word was used for both, but I am differentiating here for clarity in describing the struggle). It was suggested that whites could be members, but not officers. There would be a quota; whites would be allowed to have only a percentage of membership. My memory

is that the quota was one-third. Although not all of these ideas occupied AAA, the same struggle over the same issues was later to prevail on the *Ufahamu* board.

It is significant to add here that these politics were mainly expressed by African Americans and not continental Africans, who seemed uncomfortable with the process. Although, generally, whites were not privy to the conflicts between Africans and African Americans, I had enough conversations with my friends and peers to know some of what was going on. Some African friends expressed to me deep resentment that they were just moving out of colonialism in their own countries only to experience African Americans telling them how to be African. They were also worried about their academic standing, offending their professors, and alienating the administration of the African Studies Center and Program. In many cases these African students in African Studies and in the disciplines had been sent, at great expense, by their own institutions and felt that, although they could be active in issues related to Africa, they should keep a low profile in such controversial matters as quotas and in taking on the host institution. Others argued that they had much more important issues to contend with in their own countries: civil strife, famine, wresting control from colonialism and neocolonial manifestations, confronting corrupt governments, ethnic divisions, and the like. However, the conflict between Africans and African Americans stayed below the radar.

The struggle among graduate students (and a handful of undergraduates) about the vision, composition, and practice of the AAA included whether or not views about Africa, African liberation, and ending white/colonial/neocolonial hegemony could be best expressed through activism on campus and in the community or if

the most effective way to practice and disseminate our ideas would be through the written word. Therefore, while some AAA members were looking into altering the race structure of African Studies and the campus as a whole, other members argued that we should move forward with our activism on behalf of Africa by advancing progressive research and writing. This began to take on the look of "community activists" versus elitist academics, or those who wanted to act versus those who wanted to talk and write. It was a false dichotomy because the most active students in both organizations were both activists and academics. I saw myself as both.

The fear of some members about establishing a journal was that (1) our activism would retreat into "easy" and "safe" activist forms such as political writing (2) a journal is an elitist mode of activism and would exclude non-literate people in Africa and non-academics in the U.S. and Greater Los Angeles communities and (3) the work it would take to produce a journal would siphon off the energy of the AAA into a project that would bring more fruits to the careers of graduate students than benefits to Africa.

Nonetheless, the desire for a journal prevailed and an editorial board was elected from the membership of the AAA. The president of the AAA would oversee the journal. From the start there was tension between the officers of the AAA and the editors of the journal. The race politics of the AAA was reflected in the composition and general vision of the journal, with a quota for the editors. There was much discussion and dissension about how closely, if at all, the journal would be connected to the African Studies Center. The problem was that the journal had no independent funding and, eventually, had to give in to taking money from the ASC. However,

with Leo Kuper, a progressive thinker, as Director of the ASC, the editors were able to negotiate that there would be no interference in content or in the composition of the editorial board. With that agreement, the journal agreed to be funded in the amount of \$500 yearly. The only reason the journal was able to produce three issues every year with so little money was that the ASC paid postage and all labor was volunteer. It was decided that there would be no chief editor, only an editorial board, in keeping with the non-hierarchical structure that was supposedly an important component of the two organizations. Volume I, No. 1 was published in 1970, designed with gratis labor by one of the senior editors of *African Arts*, also connected to UCLA's African Studies Center, and by one of the graduate student staff members of *African Arts* who was also on the *Ufahamu* editorial board, Renee Poussaint.

I have to admit that I was sure, at one point, that the journal would never come into being. The struggles over the first issue were so many and so complex that it is difficult to articulate the extent of the political energy that was expended. Both the AAA and the journal had among them Black Panthers, Black Consciousness advocates, members of US, and other competing Black and African groups. We also had among us orthodox communists and an array of New Left groups--Trotskyists, Maoists, Marxist-Leninists and members of the New American Movement and Peace and Freedom Party, and the like. We also had a close link with what was then called the Black Student Union, with some ongoing tension over just how closely linked we should be. There was the usual problem of the fact that the AAA and the journal had white students as members and the Black Student Union was all Black.

Putting out the first issue of the journal was,

therefore, a political struggle. Everything about our process became politicized, i.e., the question of whether or not an elite white student editor dared to correct the grammar of an article written by a Black or African author. The point was argued that whites cannot comprehend Black English (before this terminology became well-known) and should, therefore, not touch the prose. This was an especially intense learning experience for me, as I was the only white editor on the journal board for some time after Allen Thurm left. I gained a great deal of humility from my work on *Ufahamu*, being forced, through the circumstances I had chosen for myself, to confront various forms of my own racism daily. I will forever be indebted to my colleagues for their forbearance.

The first issue contained articles by Henry (Hank) Richardson, Woodrow (Woody) Nichols, Harry Meserve, Edward Hower, Fritz Pointer, and myself, with a book review by Joy Stewart, representing the fields of law, history, geography, art, and literature. My own article was on the political arts of Sudan, a subject about which I am still publishing.

The most exciting piece in this first issue of the journal was the interview that we journal editors conducted with Gil Fernandez, one of Cabral's close colleagues who was, at that time, the representative in Cairo of the African Independence Party of Guinea (Bissau) and Cape Verde Islands, or PAIGC. This was a time in our African Studies Center when African revolutionaries visited and graduate students had access to people who were carrying out struggles on the ground. Fernandez told us a bit about the struggle that was then ongoing (Cabral had not yet been assassinated and the revolution was going well). We asked Fernandez about the strike that sparked the revolt and then about labor unions, in general, under the

Portuguese. We asked about the problems confronting the PAIGC in convincing the peasantry to join the struggle, how they communicated with people in the countryside and how they avoided informers. We asked how close their movement was to other liberation movements against the Portuguese, especially FRELIMO. We asked who would take part in the negotiations with the Portuguese when they reach that point (the interview was filled with optimism—both his and ours). We asked him to compare the PAIGC movement with other liberation and anti-colonial movements, such as the ones in South Africa and Zimbabwe. We asked a lot of questions about the tactics of guerilla warfare. The interview was quite long—2-3 hours, and we were given a very close-up view of an African guerilla movement.

These interviews became a feature of the journal for some time. We took full advantage of a number of illustrious figures who passed through the ASC, such as Basil Davidson. We mainly published academic essays, but we tried to vary our format with interviews, poetry, art, book reviews, and occasionally political reports. After the assassination of Cabral the journal sponsored a large memorial ceremony, with talks from people such as Haile Girma and various African community leaders, and then published a special issue on Cabral. Through the years the AAA has organized a number of outstanding conferences that have reached national status.

The AAA and *Ufahamu* have continued to work together and apart. Their relationship has changed throughout the years, but was never broken. The relationship of the journal to the African Studies Center has sometimes been a troubled one, with the journal becoming increasingly dependent on the ASC for funding and finding its fortunes ebbing and flowing according to

the budgetary constraints of the Center.

Until the late 1970s, the gender politics of the journal were non-reconstructed. We were recipients of the political idea that the worst off areas of the U.S. population are Black men, which was true (and is even worse now), but the solution was that women (Black women) should stand behind their men, move the men to the forefront, and stay in the background (Elaine Brown's account of her life as a Black Panther revealed this process so clearly). The leadership of AAA was male; the editorial board of *Ufahamu* was male-dominated. However, women did all the work. Two women, actually: Renee Poussaint and I did the lion's share of the labor. The men talked; the women worked. And when we had meetings, either for the AAA or the journal, it was the women who brought the food and drinks and tended to the small details. I was the Secretary of the AAA, but never aspired to be President. Descriptions of this phenomenon reached cliché status within feminist circles a few years later. At one point, Renee Poussaint, after discussing the matter with me, rebelled and announced to the editorial board that she did all the work and, therefore, she should be Editor-in-Chief. This caused considerable consternation and more struggle, but in the face of Renee's threat to resign, the board members acquiesced and we had our first Editor-in-Chief, a position that has been maintained since then.

A number of the people who served as editors of *Ufahamu* went on to become leaders and active professionals. Just to name a very few, Renee Poussaint is a well-known T.V. news anchor and commentator in Washington, D.C.; Henry (Hank) Richardson is a law professor. The late Robert (Bob) Cummings, who was President of AAA and later on the editorial board of the journal, went on to become a successful academic and

influential advisor on Africa. Teshome Gabriel, Editor-in-Chief in the mid-1970s, is now a full professor in T.V. and Film here at UCLA, and I am a full professor in Anthropology and Women's Studies. Many of the activists of those years became influential figures in one way or another. The late Henry Chipembere was a dissident from Malawi who continued to sting Banda for years. Syl Coker-Cheney is a famous poet and intellectual. I suppose it could be said that this band of radicals has become part of the establishment, but that would be overlooking the alternative voices that these *Ufahamu* alums and so many of the former activists interject in everything they do: teaching, broadcasting, writing, being politicians and diplomats. *Ufahamu* has been a training ground in the best sense of that phrase.

Politics have changed; times have changed. The radical nature of the journal has ebbed and flowed, as has its quality. No matter its fluctuating nature, the journal is well-known far beyond its limited distribution, and gained its reputation long before the internet and email. When I am in Africa I can find many people who know the name of the journal, even if they have never had a copy in their hands. This is what we founders claimed we wanted, to reach Africa and Africans. The mere fact of a student-run journal lasting from 1970 until now (2008) in print version and soon living on as an online publication is partial testimony to the importance of *Ufahamu*, with its alternative voice and determined group of forever changing generations of optimists who believe that we can, indeed, change the world and who believe in the potential of Africa.

As for the future of the journal, there is probably no better future than an online version because it might go some distance in accomplishing some of the original

goals of the journal that had never been fully realized. It will reduce the dependence on UCLA's administration and democratize the journal in a number of ways. Online publications are gaining in prestige and are, as we know, revolutionizing the publishing world.

Furthermore, online publications allow for much more flexibility, for the inclusion of unlimited visuals, even for sound and animation (if one has the technical expertise). Because of the nature of the beast, it can be a much more communal project as well. However, the main goal that can be accomplished is reaching the continent, putting the journal in the hands of African institutions, NGO's, and individuals. An online journal will be able to receive far more submissions from Africans living the lives we can only talk about or report indirectly. And if the journal editors work out the technicalities, the online journal can open up opportunities for dialogue between Africanists here at UCLA and Africans working on the same issues. The journal can then be informed more directly, be more up-to-date in its analyses, and have touch with what is happening on the ground. I will never forget a comment from a Nuba Mountains guerilla commander from the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) who had been asked to give me permission to enter the guerilla-controlled area of the Nuba Mountains to help set up adult education centers for women. In his hand-delivered hard copy permission letter, he welcomed me to the area and said that he had read some of my writings on the internet! Such access to each other can only serve to generate intellectual and political exchanges among us and help us build progressive movements together.