

The African American Academy

by

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The African American Academy was an African-centered pre-school and elementary school in Cincinnati, Ohio. *The Academy* was founded by Dr. Clarissa Myrick-Harris and Dr. Norman Harris. The Center for African World Studies, Inc. was the community group that assisted in bringing *The Academy* into existence. *The Academy* also benefitted from the help of several Africana scholars who were organized as *The Friends of the African American Academy*.

The African American Academy opened for business on September 12, 1994 and closed its doors for business on June 8, 1996. What happened? This essay answers that question.

I.

“What Were You Thinking In The First Place?”

Consult any Small Business Administration office or any Minority Business Incubator and they will tell you that most business fail within the first three years, and that one of the biggest problems confronting “minority” business is under-capitalization. Another dimension of business success or failure is location. Cincinnati, Ohio is not on the cutting edge of Africentric thought; indeed, in many ways its Africana community still seems constrained by its weird history of being a place to which slave owners sent their mulatto offspring for education. The education of these mulatto children was most assuredly meant to instill loyalty to their slave-owning fathers. While, the Cincinnati Public School system does not now openly espouse this kind of ideology, they do have a function similar if not synonymous to what slave-owning fathers wanted more than a century ago--blind obedience and active participation in self-underdevelopment. The mentality of dependence and self-doubt being taught in the Cincinnati Public School System was one of the reasons we decided to start *The Academy*. We knew of the challenges involved in starting *The Academy*, yet we decided to borrow money and start our school. But, what were we really thinking?

One answer emerges from Claude McKay’s sonnet, “Baptism:”

*Into the furnace let me go alone;
Stay you without in terror of the heat.
I will go naked in --for thus ‘tis sweet--
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone...*

The sonnet concludes:

*Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
Transforming me into a shape of flame.
I will come out, back to your world of tears,
A stronger soul within a finer frame.*

There are times in Africana world history when the requirements of change outstrip syllogistic logic. Why rationally would an enslaved African assume that things were better up North, and risk certain death if caught “running away with himself?” Or indeed, what rational explanation

is there for a Harriet Tubman to have routinely risked her life to return south to liberate her enslaved sisters and brothers? And who gave Marcus Garvey permission to be a man? Consider too the profound example of Fannie Lou Hamer: literally beaten within an inch of her life because she wanted to vote. Africana world history is replete with people who took illogical actions so that the lives of all people might exist at a higher level. Thus, we must wonder what syllogistic logic is? What is its relevance to social change?

Logic is taught to Africana people in a way that destroys their divine potential. Our divine potential derives from the fact that the Creator has shared with us Its omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. These attributes are shared in quality, not in quantity, and have the same relationship to the Creator as a drop of water has to the Oceans, and Seas of the world.¹ Logic teaches us that these attributes are not a part of our make-up as human beings. Rather, we are taught to identify with the material aspects of our humanity--our appetites, desires, comforts, and so on. When an individual, or a group of people view themselves from a materialist perspective, they are in a wonderful position to be manipulated by things. This fact is the basis for advertising--we are all conditioned to associate a non-material or abstract state-- like happiness, love, contentment, etc.--with material things: *I will be happy when I get that car. I will be in love when he acts right. I will be content when I get that computer....* Africana people are of course subject to these pressures, but our history is such that these pressures take on an added dimension. Racism is the added dimension and it has the result of withholding or destroying access to various opportunities. In a materialist culture, this kind of denial often increases the desire for both a given material thing, as well as the psychological state (contentment, love, acceptance, etc.) associated with the material thing. What I am describing is the continued basis for enslavement: enough is given or promised to keep the unconscious Africana community ready to perform a variety of tasks to get more. This enslavement is not a random process. It is a process whereby syllogistic logic is used to capture the imagination. Due to the materialist bias of western education, the socialized elevation of syllogistic logic leads to cultural imperialism which reduces all people's history to the least common denominator of crass appearances. The animating spirit, or purpose of people's interaction with the world is lost.

This external consideration of history reduces Africana people to objects.² This is certainly the way we have been encouraged to view ourselves, and this view is the core of what Bernard Bell calls socialized ambivalence, or what DuBois calls double-consciousness. These psychological states can be the source of great anguish, or they, like all energy, have the potential of being converted into something that elevates the spiritual development of the affected individual and her community. As noted in my essay on time and space, consciousness determines where the fulcrum point in apparent conflicts is to be placed. When consciousness is under-developed, then the fulcrum point between the apparent conflict of being an African and being an American, is located in a position that results in Africana people seeing themselves as objects. Objects are of course devoid of consciousness, and the absence of consciousness is key to continued enslavement; indeed, an absence of consciousness makes people pliable--even if emotional--accomplices in their own oppression.

¹ Ra Un Neefer Amen, *Metu Neter, Volume 1, The Great Oracle of Tehuti and the Egyptian System of Spiritual Cultivation* (New York: Khamit Corp., 1990), pp. 82-102)

² Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), pp. 19-80 explores this issue.

Our logically educated sisters and brothers often do not understand sincerity, for it is an abstract concept which is not narrowly tied to personal material gain. Sincere attempts at social change are driven by the divine divisions of the spirit--the Ba division wherein resides Ausar (omnipresence), Tehuti (omniscience), and Seker (omnipotence). As a consequence, the Sahu division of the spirit--Het-Heru (imagination), Sebek (syllogistic logic), and Auset (trance ability)--is not able to comprehend actions that are motivated by a desire to do good, to do God. Inasmuch as most people are not actively involved in resurrecting the Ba division of the spirit, they are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by those who are so inclined. Let me put this directly: we were divinely led to start *The African American Academy*. Our ability to get start-up funding, and to lease property from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati occurred because we allowed ourselves to be possessed and guided by the project. There were a number of concrete motivations too, most notably our two daughters--Amina, who was 10 at the time, and Ayana who was three at the time.

II.

“I Know Ya’ll Didn’t Do It By Yo’Self”

In the Spring of 1993 I was browsing a bookstore in Cincinnati, Ohio and came across a book titled *Metu Neter, Volume One, The Great Oracle of Tehuti and the Egyptian System of Spiritual Cultivation*. Ra Un Neefer Amen is the author. I devoured the book and in deciding not to share my copy with my wife, I rushed back to the bookstore to buy her a copy. I arranged for the author to visit the University of Cincinnati campus and, from there, decided to establish an Ausar Auset Study Group. Our Study group was wonderfully free of the limiting logic of the University intelligentsia.

Study Group members made up a fairly diverse group, both in terms of gender and occupation. Initially, we had more women than men in the Study Group, and we had more “working class” people than professional people. By working class I mean a driver for UPS, a security guard at an insurance company, three housewives, and an electrician. Our professional members included, an IRS agent, an insurance claims adjuster, a couple of university professors and an inspector for the Health Department.

I convened the Study Group and led our taped discussions. Our taped discussions were sent to our teacher, a Priestess in the Ausar Auset society. She sent her taped responses to our discussion back to me, and we made copies for Study Group members. This was a wonderful experience for all involved. At the end of the process, we took a written exam, which she graded. Those of us who scored high enough and then wrote an essay were certified to teach a beginning Cosmology course in the Ausarian System of Spiritual Cultivation. My wife and I were among those who qualified.

Our Ausar Auset Study Group underwent the usual connotations associated with group dynamics. There was joy that we decided to organize a study group, and at the same time there was suspicion and resentment that we decided to organize the study group. As noted above, individuals whose consciousness is shaped by the Sahu division of the spirit are unable to see what is in front of them--even when it is precisely the blessing they have longed for. This tendency to be dazed and disbelieving of opportunities that can meet needs is a recurring aspect of African world history. It evolves from our Eurocentric education and socialization. The

same orientation obtains even among those who do not labor under the weight of terminal degrees; it obtains because of the Judeo-Christian orientation--an essentially pessimistic, materialist view of the world--which structures this culture. Thus, there is always the questioning of motives: Why are they really doing this? What are they going to get out of this? The experience with the Ausar Auset Study Group foreshadowed some of the challenges we had with employees and parents affiliated with *The Academy*.

However, those who stayed with the Study Group played critical roles in helping to bring *The African American Academy* into being. One member designed the uniforms, others sold tee-shirts, distributed flyers, and generally used their contacts as long-time residents of Cincinnati to talk up *The Academy*. While these efforts did not directly contribute to the financial infrastructure needed to start the school, and they did not directly contribute to the creation of the curriculum to run the school, they were precisely the kinds of efforts needed to move us forward.

One of the things we determined early in this process was that we wanted to make *The Academy* a school which would be built by the different economic classes within the Africana Community. Our history indicates that our institutions do best when they are the collective result of the work of people from different economic classes. Our history also demonstrates that a shared set of operational values³ is needed for institution building to have the optimal chance for success. It was of course the absence of shared values that ultimately complicated our ability to successfully do staff training. Our Study Group was a good cross-section of our Africana community, and we shared values. For this reason, the Cincinnati Ausar Auset Study Group was essential to *The African American Academy* getting off the ground.

We were working from a tradition of institution building. We saw ourselves making a contribution that would benefit our children, as well as the children of people we had not met. Ours was an intelligent act of faith:

*“Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoking air to-night,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.
(Jean Toomer, “Song of the Son”)*

III. “What About the Curriculum”

We developed the curriculum based on the Paut Neteru, the Kemeite Tree of Life, the Nguzo Saba, and the Ten Cardinal Virtues. Our educational philosophy as stated in our charter reads as follows:

³ Starting with *The Quotable Karenga*, and *Kawaida Studies*, to *The African American Holiday of Kwanzaa*, Maulana Karenga does most to depict the centrality of values to institution building and social change.

The African American Academy is an African-Centered School (Africentric) which welcomes students from all ethnic and racial backgrounds. Our basic educational philosophy is derived from the Ausarian System of Spiritual Cultivation. We believe that every child is created in the image of God and that the purpose of education is to systematically lead that child through activities that will result in the acquisition of attitudes and skills necessary to the resurrection of the God within. Thus, from our point of view, all children are capable of endless growth. This growth is a process we call Khepera, "the infinite power of manifestation." The specific expression of a child's growth, and development will vary from child to child. So, while we strive to resurrect the God within a specific child, we do so in a way to make it clear that while there are fundamental principles to which all our children have to adhere, there are infinite ways in which those principles can be expressed.

The core values of the African American Academy are the Nguzo Saba (the seven principles) and The Ten Cardinal Virtues. Our students are taught, for example, that there are a myriad of ways to express umoja (unity, one of the seven principles), or ujima (collective work and responsibility). We are teaching them that individual expression and growth take place most responsibly and fully when we understand that the infinite range of human expression derives from a single source--the one God within us all.

The organizing core or hub of our curriculum is The Tree of Life. The eleven spheres of Tree of Life are the basis for systematically resurrecting the God within each child. We teach the children the idea of unity in the midst of diversity by focusing on the fact that there is a single intelligence which orders all things in the world. Accordingly, we prepare them from an early age to see connections among the many expressions of nature. We use the human body, the solar system and nature as external examples of how the Tree of Life works--that is, to show unity in the midst of diversity. In kindergarten, we start with basic functions and appearances of the human body, the solar system and nature, and go more deeply into each of these at each grade level.

The Tree of Life also provides the basis for teaching skills in language arts and social studies. In language arts and social studies, the idea of unity in the midst of diversity is presented by teaching our students the various conventions of expression (written, oral performing, governmental cultural, etc.) and at the same time teaching them the myriad ways in which these conventions can be adapted, energized and sometimes transformed as they are filtered through the Ausarian System of Spiritual Cultivation. Because we believe each child is created in God's image and that it is the job of education to resurrect that God, our pedagogy is dynamic and various. We use some methods that are similar to Montessori, some that are simply rote (particularly for children who need to gain a degree of "unthinking" comfort with performing certain repetitive math operations prior to understanding the principles governing those functions), some that are dramatic, and some that are hands-on. In short, because we do not view God as having limitations, we do not limit the pedagogy we use that is intended to resurrect that God. Practically, the intended outcome of our pedagogy is attitude development and skill acquisition consistent with a child maximizing her potential in the context of her relationship to and responsibility to a community.

It was of course easier to state our Philosophy of Education than it was to implement our Philosophy of Education. We faced a variety of challenges in that direction--writing new

texts, adapting existing texts, and training staff. More on that below. Let me return to the Tree of Life; it is depicted here. Names of the eleven spheres appear below:

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(0) Amen ⁵	(1) Ausar	(2) Tehuti	(3) Seker	(4) Maat	(5) Herukhuti
(6) Heru	(7) Het-Heru	(8) Sebek	(9) Auset	(10) Geb	XXXXXX

Aside from my wife and myself, the only member of our staff who had any understanding of our Educational Philosophy was Mr. Drayton Robinson, Jr. In innumerable ways, his contributions to *The Academy* were invaluable. He was a rock. I will deal with the challenges of staff-training below, but let me now return to the curriculum.

As envisioned, we never put our curriculum in place, but what we did do with our curriculum conformed to the learning outcomes for each grade level as prescribed by the

⁵ *The Paut Neteru* is the informing paradigm of Ra Un Neefer Amen's work. See the bibliography.

State of Ohio Department of Education. We were awarded a Charter from the Ohio Department of Education in April of 1995. There were, however, some basic aspects of our Cosmology that we were able to implement. Because our Cosmology asserts that reality is one thing with infinite expressions, we used the following principles to organize our curriculum: (1) the principle of duality—that which is perceived or revealed and that which is un-perceived or hidden; (2) the principle of unity in the midst of diversity is related to the principle of duality—unity is possible because reality is a single entity, and diversity is possible because the one entity is capable of assuming infinite forms; and (3) the principle of equilibrium wherein the simultaneous dual expressions of nature find the appropriate relationship so that both may co-exist. These principles are my extrapolations from the work of Ra Un Neefer Amen, Quantum Physics, and Kemet History. Obviously, there are other principles useful to the initiation of our children, but these represent a profound start.

The Academy operated from pre-school to sixth grade in its first year, and we added the seventh grade in our second year. The chronology of our curriculum is important: at all levels we began by exploring the Big Questions: Who or what made the world? Why are we here? What is our purpose in our life? And a variety of similar questions that children routinely ask. Answers to these questions were sought in a variety of places—religion, mythology, cosmology, science, and stories the children may have heard from their parents. We were not interested in an orthodox response; rather, we were interested in the children getting used to seeing a relationship between basic beliefs they had about fundamental questions, and the kind of questions they might ask and answer about life. It remains our view that this approach is key to making people life-long learners: always seeking to ask and answer questions in a holistic fashion. Obviously, we did not explain it to the children this way, nor was this made explicitly clear to our teachers during the second year. We talked about relationships among different expressions of a single reality.

Along with questions of creation and purpose, the Story of Ausar was central to our curriculum. We chose this story and put it to the use we did because it was consistent with the kind of Africentric education we wished to enact. Ancient African educational systems were in fact systems of initiation that have seven related steps: separation, location in a sacred place, symbolic death and burial, revelation, testing, resurrection, and reintroduction into the larger community.⁶ Education was a process of rebirth and empowerment. This is precisely what the story of Ausar conveys. Further, the apparent conflicts we see in the story, and their resolutions provide metaphors for understanding a variety of social and scientific phenomenon. Thus, no matter what the child learns, she has a referent in the story of Ausar. This is a basis for holistic education and is consistent with the ways that Africans have traditionally viewed the world.

⁶ See Asa Hilliard, "Pedagogy in Ancient Kemet," in M. Karenga and J.H. Carruthers (Eds.), *Kemet and the African Worldview* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1985), pp. 131-148.

This story is at least 4,000 years old, and it has many nuances. My version is an extrapolation of Ishmael Reed's version in *Mumbo Jumbo*—which, interestingly, is the first place I came across the story—and Ra Un Neefer Amen's versions of the story in *The Metu Neter, Volumes One and Two*. What follows is my synopsis of the Story of Ausar:

It is not entirely clear from whence Ausar came. Some say he came from Atlantis, others say he came from southern Africa. What is clear is that when Ausar entered Kemet, there was no civilization. An absence of order was the norm. He took Auset as his wife, and together they brought order and peace to Kemet. Order and peace are the basis for prosperity, so all the people of Kemet prospered under the reign of Ausar and Auset. Ausar domesticated animals, and Auset taught agriculture and healing.

Things were going well for a time, but for some reason, and from out of nowhere, people would get possessed. They would drop their farm implements in the middle of a task, and start dancing. This caused a great deal of disruption in the orderly flow of Kemet society. Ausar and Auset were confused as to what to do.

A sage named Tehuti explained to Ausar what was going on. Tehuti said that the spirits which guided the people to live and work in an orderly fashion were not being appropriately acknowledged and handled. These spirits, or Neteru, were like very fertile plants that had to be appropriately pruned, fed, and acknowledged. Because Ausar was so in tune with nature, he never considered that his life style was itself a series of rituals that kept him in tune with the cycles of nature. But it was apparent that all people were not as in tune with nature as was Ausar. People needed to be taught the appropriate rituals to solidify and keep orderly their relationship with nature. Various processes of initiation were put into place.

Tehuti had Ausar enact all the rituals he knew for each of the Neteru, and Tehuti then set those rituals down in print. These books became the wisdom texts in which all people were instructed. Priests were instructed as to the intricacies of the wisdom texts, and they could then guide people who were taken over by one or more of these Neteru to an appropriate balance--a sublime equilibrium.

Order was again restored, so Ausar decided to share his gifts with the rest of the world. He embarked on a worldwide tour. He left Auset in charge of the kingdom of Kemet. The people at that time were at peace and knew the difference between good and evil. So Auset did not have to impose order on anyone. However, her brother, Set [in most versions, Ausar, Auset, and Set are depicted as siblings] was jealous of her and of Ausar.

He conspired to create problems. He would harass people, demanding that they stop having fun while they worked. The people laughed at Set because he could not dance. Set was unable to create problems.

When Ausar returned from his world-tour, there was a great celebration. Auset was happy to see her husband and their union that day resulted in the conception of Heru [some accounts have Auset resurrecting the murdered Ausar, and through that resurrection Heru is immaculately conceived and born]. During the celebration, Set brought out a beautiful sarcophagus that had been constructed to exactly fit Ausar. Set then said that he would give the sarcophagus to whomever it fitted. After several people tried unsuccessfully, Ausar was invited to try. When he got into the sarcophagus, Set's henchmen sealed him in, and threw the sarcophagus into the Nile.

Later that night, Set's henchman drug the sarcophagus from the Nile, opened it, and dismembered Ausar's body. When Auset heard of her husband's fate, she and Nebt-Het (Het-Heru), set about the task of finding the different parts of his body, and remembering them. Wherever a part of his body was found, a shrine rose up in his honor.

Set took control of Kemet, but his reign was not orderly, peaceful and prosperous. He began to hear rumors that the son of Ausar and Auset was to be born. Set immediately ordered all male children to be killed. With the help of Anpu, Auset was able to shield Heru from Set, and to raise him to adulthood.

When he came of age, Heru engaged Set in battle in order to regain his father's crown. The two battled for hundreds of years, and neither was able to win decisively. Finally, Heru consulted with Tehuti who told him that the conflict had to be resolved by the Court of the Gods. The Gods (Neteru) decided that Set had not been true of word and deed--in other words, he was not living by the standards he forced others to live by. Heru was awarded the crown, and Set's penalty was to use his gift of communication in service of the Ausarian System of Spiritual Cultivation.

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The story provides a way to understand a variety of expressions in nature, and a variety of ways that humanity has chosen to organize itself. It provides lessons as to the necessity of unity and peace to prosperity. Ausar's murder and dismemberment symbolize the results of dis-unity, and his re-remembering, symbolizes the fact that life is not a material function—rather, it is a spiritual entity that lives beyond the physical body. There are numerous connections that can be made from the story of *Ausar*. Please see Appendix Two for examples of how the Story was used, and for a brief discussion of the Learning Theory that structured what we were doing. Let me return now to the mechanics of curricular implementation.

We ended the first year with 24 students in the elementary school and 40 students in the pre-school. During the first year, we hired two elementary school teachers and went through a variety of class groupings to find the right mix of age, gender and competencies. Because enrollment did not pick-up during the first year, we had to let both of our elementary school teachers go, and we hired two teaching assistants. Mr. Larry White lasted the longest period of time as a teaching assistant, and made significant contributions in a variety of areas. Enrollment in the pre-school continued to climb, and

we had consistent challenges in staffing the pre-school. During our second year, our enrollment warranted hiring four full-time elementary school teachers. Before discussing their contributions and the challenges we faced in the area of staff training, let me briefly elaborate on how we were able to increase our enrollment.

Approximately half the students enrolled the first year did not return the second year. From what we were able to discover, the reason for them not again their children stemmed from *The Academy* not being what they thought it would be. And what did they think it would be? This is a question that I cannot answer here, but it would appear that they wished for their children an essentially Eurocentric education in African-centered education.

After the Pilot Voucher Program that the Ohio State Legislature was considering was scuttled, I devised a full-day program. Students whose parents received public assistance were generally eligible for stipends to cover the cost of before and after-school or latch-key programs. We created a before and an after-school program. Parents were to pay the difference between what the Hamilton County Department of Family and Children Services paid and what the tuition was. Our tuition was \$2,700 annually, and we allowed parents to pay \$270.00 per month over a ten month period. The county paid between \$175 and \$210 per month for eligible students. This meant that children could arrive at *The Academy* as early as 7:00 a.m. and leave as late as 6:00 p.m., have breakfast, lunch, and a snack, all for a cost to parents between \$78 and \$92 per month. So it was this arrangement that provided the basis for our increased enrollment. By the second year we had a total of 120 students in the pre-school and the elementary school. Let me turn now to the teachers we hired the second year.

All staff were trained in terms of our educational philosophy, Africentric content and practice--including lesson plans, various workshops and other activities needed for them to be in compliance with state law. A honeymoon period accompanies new employment, and during this period at *The Academy*, each one of our teachers took readily to the *Neteru* associated with the each sphere of the *Paut Neteru*. Our kindergarten teacher referred to her class as the *Het-Heru Crew*; our second and third grade teacher referred to her class as *Auset To Go*; our fourth and fifth grade teacher referred to his class as *The Heru Crew*; and our sixth, and seven grade teacher referred to her class as the *Ausarian Society*.

Each year, we had an African Dance Class and a class in martial arts. We were able to keep the costs of these down by contracting with existing organizations. All of our students, including the pre-schoolers took these classes each week.

At the beginning of the year, I took an hour a week for each elementary class in which I instructed them in the Ausarian Cosmology. My instruction was keyed to the specific content—math, science, social studies, language arts—on which they were working. The teachers also turned their lesson plans in each week, and I made suggestions about how they could be worked to fit the Africentric theory of our school.

A curriculum is not only content, lesson plans, and tests and so on. These are only the manifestations of a curriculum—as Baraka notes, “Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Walls.” A curriculum, like “Hunting,” is a process; therefore, in order for our curriculum to work, we had to create a context or process for it to work. What we needed therefore was to create both the appearance and the reality of family. We did this in a number of ways, but the most consistent method was our morning assembly. We began each day with stretching and aerobic exercises, first led by me or my wife, later by one of our teachers, and finally by our students. After the exercises, there was usually some discussion about current events, accomplishments and challenges that our students had undergone at *The Academy*. Students then recited the Nguzo Saba, our school poem, which was written by Ms. Angela Eddings, one of our teachers. We then sang, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. The morning assembly provided us with a point of reference, and unity.

We also did an annual play, *First Fruits*, which was written by Dr. Clarissa Myrick-Harris. Within the western tradition, *First Fruits* could be seen as a *passion play*. Within the Africana tradition, *First Fruits* was a ritualized affirmation of the reasons, and purposes of *The African American Academy*. *First Fruit* uses the *Paut Neteru* (Tree of Life) as a basis to explore the role of history to understanding and resolving problems springing from the educational challenges faced by Africana people. The play uses flashbacks to dramatize the centrality of institution building to the resolution of problems that Africana people have faced throughout their history. A full copy of *First Fruits* can be found in Appendix Three.

The Academy did not generate enough revenue for me to leave my position as Professor of African American Studies at the University of Cincinnati. While I defined my work at *The Academy* as part of my research and service--something my employers did not agree with--doing the school required a profound juggling act. Before we opened *The Academy*, I wrote a Challenge Grant for funding from the University of Cincinnati. The University of Cincinnati Challenge Grant category funds activities that have the potential of bringing in external funding. Returning again to the Ohio State Legislature, in addition to the Pilot Voucher Program, the state legislature was also considering legislation that would have created Charter Schools. My vision was that *The African American Academy* would be a laboratory school for the Department of African American Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Although approved in the Ohio House of Representatives, the charter school legislation never left the State Senate’s Education Committee. To make matters even more challenging, in a variety of ways, the University of Cincinnati decided to attack my professional activities and *The Academy*.

Under the circumstances, we were able to make a profound contribution. In quoting the historian Leonard Curry, William Banks makes the same point in his book, *Black Intellectuals*: “One of the remarkable accomplishments in American history is the degree to which they [Africana people] marshaled their slender financial and human resources, the rapidity with which they strengthened their institutions, and the effectiveness with which they developed educational opportunities adapted to their needs.”

V.
“*In-Service Training*”

Many unionized public school teachers are paid to attend in-service training. The system provides substitute teachers to cover their classes. We relied on our parents to cover classes during in-service training, and there was no extra-pay for this process. None of our teachers were familiar with the Ausarian System of Spiritual Cultivation that animated our school, and there was no abiding desire to know about this system beyond the requirements of the job.

As noted above, there was a period at the beginning of their employment--and here I am talking about the second year of *The Academy*--when the staff was eager to learn the philosophy which structured our school. The depth of the system we were trying to implement required our teachers to revisit previously held beliefs at practically every level. There was resistance on religious grounds, and, in part, because some of our teachers could not imagine an African system that not only pre-dated various expressions of Eurocentric thought, but that were in point of fact the basis for these. In ways that they did not and perhaps still do not understand, our teachers were very much immersed in Eurocentric thought. In this, they were very much like most Africana people. When I was an undergraduate student (1971-73) at Indiana University, I headed a student group that brought Imamu Amiri Baraka to campus, and one of the points he made to Africana students attending universities (Africana or non-Africana) is that for every sick Eurocentric concept that we can identify as such and dismiss, two or three other sick concepts get through. Baraka puts the matter more directly in his poem, “Nation Time:”

*Ashes to ashes and dust to dust
there's some jive cracker,
most niggers trust
Its Nation Time*

The point I make throughout this essay is that the “trust” in “some jive cracker,” that some Africana people exhibit is truly an unconscious affair. None of our teachers sat down and decided to “trust” this white orientation or that white orientation. Rather, what happens is that as participant /victims of this culture, we passively accept a variety of debilitating values. In this way we become articulate versions of Pavlov’s dogs, salivating on cue and not knowing why. *The Pert Em Heru*, what many of our European colleagues label *The Book of The Dead*, translates as *The Book of Becoming Awake*. *The Pert Em Heru* assumes that most of us move zombie-like through life without knowing our divine nature. The purpose of our school was to start our children along a life-long process of initiation needed to awaken their divine nature. Obviously, we needed to train our teachers in this tradition. For a variety of reasons, we were not able to successfully do the kind of training we wished to do.

Our teachers were like most Africana people--sincerely dedicated to seeing the lives of Africana people improve, but generally without a clue relative to the relationship that a particular set of beliefs has to social change. For them, Black History was a compilation of names, dates, and places. The informing spirit of that history was a foreign concept because, in part, the idea of spirit was tied to moribund notions of religion. Spirit was something you approached on Sundays.

It should be understood that from the point of view of resources, and ingenuity, all of our teachers were quite innovative, and sincere. Compared to what goes on in many public schools, our teachers were extraordinary. But we were trying to build an Africentric school, and while our teachers' obvious love for our children provided the opportunity for learning, it was not in-itself enough.

So, what was the problem? Commitment and time were the factors needed and the factors that were absent. Budgetary issues made it impossible to select teachers well in advance of the school year--we did not know how many students we would have until two weeks before the school year. As a consequence we really could not extend offers as early as we would have liked and as a consequence, we could not engage in training and screening. Additionally, there was no pool of Africentric candidates from which to draw. We had hoped that students I taught at the University of Cincinnati might provide a talent pool, but because the University attacked the school, former students were reticent to get involved. So, the teachers we hired did not come from an Africentric background, certainly they were not conversant with the literature in the area. Though they clearly did the best they could do in a challenging situation, the two truths of Maati--the left and right brain understanding--alluded our teachers. Given the level of development that our teachers brought with them and given the pressures under which we operated, in-service training was episodic at best.

One of the clearest lessons from this part of our experience is that it is problematic to hire people into key positions who are not really committed to what you are trying to do. We were not and are not interested in replicating Eurocentric schools in "Black Face." We faced a similar set of problems with our students' parents.

VI.

"What About the Parents? What Did They Do?"

The parents who entrusted their children to our care were heroines and heroes. We had no track-record, and we had limited backing. We will always respect and be appreciative of the opportunity the parents provided us to contribute to our people--their children.

The parents of *The African American Academy* were organized as the *Ujima Society*. I was consistently ambivalent as to the degree to which I should be directly involved in organizing the parents. Even now, I am not sure what I could have done differently. I provided parents with updates on our financial situation, suggested ways

they could help, and, of course, I discussed the school's orientation. They never really got it--by which I mean that they always behaved as if someone other than Dr. Myrick-Harris and myself were running *The Academy*. On this issue we learned a profound lesson.

Despite our attempts to create an Africentric institution, Dr. Myrick-Harris and I managed our school as if students, parents, and staff were already in the process of conscious self-initiation. Although I have written in several places about the fact that *consciousness determines being*, rather than *being determining consciousness*,⁷ there was a part of me that desired to believe that when people were presented with a concrete alternative in the material world, their thinking would be positively altered by the opportunity. Here I was concretely wrestling with the theoretical debate that structured the debate between revolutionary and cultural nationalists of the sixties. The former ideology was best represented by *The Black Panthers* during the period when Eldridge Cleaver led them, and the latter ideology was best represented by Ron Karenga and *Us*, and later by Amiri Baraka and *The Congress of African People*.

What our experience at *The African American Academy* demonstrated was that consciousness is the key to our liberation. To the unconscious, the most sublime opportunity will appear as a dull-blade, incapable of cutting butter. This is a divine law: there is no real division among the different expressions of reality. Life is an allusion for those not seeking liberation, and therefore everything appears as if for the first time; such individuals, institutions and societies are unable to make connections between themselves and others. In the story of Ausar, this is symbolized by the dismembering of Ausar by Set (syllogistic logic, and materialist precedent). The different faces reality wears are merely opportunities for experience and growth. The experiences and the growth derive from self-conscious attempts to allow the higher expressions of our consciousness/spirit (the Ba division) to direct our lives in ways that keep us in touch with the fluid consistency that is life. When our consciousness is directed by an unfettered will--which is symbolized by the *Heru*⁸--we are able to see connections and make things happen. This is a life-long process, and much to our chagrin, most of the parents with children in *The*

⁷ See my "A Philosophical Basis for an Afrocentric Orientation," *Western Journal Of Black Studies* (Fall 1992), pp. 154-159; "The Sixties: An Analytical Chronology," *Western Journal of Black Studies* (Fall, 1990), pp. 145-152; *Connecting Times: The Sixties in Afro-American Fiction* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), pp.3-16. These essays also appear in this book.

⁸ The symbolism of *Heru*--the eye of the Hawk, his designation as "Su(o)n God," and his subsequent placement at the center of the universe, as well as his placement at the geographical center of *The Paut Neteru*--all points to his *centrality* to our consciousness. When I speak of an "unfettered free-will," I mean it in exactly the same way as does Ra Un Neefer Amen when he writes about willed decisions being made in a fashion that is free of emotion and that is consistent with Divine Will. For more on this see Amen's *Tree of Life Meditation System* (New York: Khamit Core, 1996), pp1 - 52.

Academy had not taken the first baby-step. As a consequence, many of the parents, particularly those with children in the pre-school, took our managerial style for weakness. For some parents, *The African American Academy* was confused with yet another social service agency. As a consequence, many did not pay or pay on time, and often disrespected our staff. Yet, it was not all negative.

Many of our parents did take a sense of ownership, occasionally assisting in cleaning the building, serving lunch, assisting in the classrooms and in the office. This was a successful part of the family atmosphere that we tried to create. In the same light, our parents and their children felt safe at *The Academy*. We did not have the opportunity to do all that we wished to do, but we did what we could.

VII.

“What About the Pre-School? You Said Ya’ll Had A Pre-School”

As noted above, an *African American Academy* goal was to involve different economic classes within the Africana community in the process of institution building. Our pre-school enrollment was 80% composed of students who received some form of government assistance to cover pre-school costs. A percentage of these children came to us at various levels of neglect.

We thought that the Ohio State Legislature would pass some form of state-wide school choice that would have allowed our pre-school students to move directly into *The Academy*. A drastically reduced program was launched in Cleveland, Ohio--in part because the school system was being taken over the Ohio Department of Education. A statewide program was not to be. Teachers’ and Administration Unions lobbied successfully to have scuttled a 1995 Pilot Program in School Vouchers that could have helped our students and our school.

It is useful to elaborate on the issue of vouchers, school choice, and charter schools because many Africana leaders are opposed to anything other than spending more money to float the current educational Titanic. They are so entranced and enamored by the idea of integration, that many Africana leaders fear that the various kinds of school choice issues discussed will lead to segregated schools, and inferior education for Africana children. No one has shown a relationship between integration and educational achievement; indeed, most research indicates the common-sense reality that children do best in environments that derive from the best traditions of their own history and culture. It should also be reiterated that it is unfair to place the burden of social integration on the backs of our children. Africana people are the only people I know of who subject their children to this kind of treatment.

What we had hoped for with passage of school choice was the forming of relationships between *The Academy* and other racial, ethnic and religious schools that could provide a basis for student, teacher and staff discussions, and, where appropriate,

exchanges. We had envisioned our Appalachian sisters and brothers creating their own, *Appalachian Academy*, and their school would be a resource for students in our school who wanted to learn and experience Appalachian culture. In effect, we had envisioned a meaningful pluralism where each institution stood on its own merit, and yet, each would be symbiotically linked. This would have been an example of unity in the midst of diversity.

But, back to *The African American Academy Pre-School*. We were not prepared to handle the kinds of children who came to us. A number of the young boys--ages three and four--were literally terrorizing our pre-school staff. By observation and example, they were learning early to disrespect Africana women. One of the early relationships we were able to establish in developing *The Academy* was with Cincinnati branch of The Nation of Islam. We used that relationship to hire Aaron Mohamed, a member of The Nation of Islam. Within a week's time, he had the young men in the program behaving like gentlemen.

We did not give the pre-school the attention we intended, as a result, we were always in a crisis situation. On the whole, our pre-school employees were very creative and productive in teaching our children. Anita Lewis, Jackie Rivers, Sheronda Kesler, and Ursula Thompson all contributed to what we were trying to do. While our pre-school curriculum--much like our elementary school curriculum--was not fully developed, what we did manage was to create a safe, nurturing and predictable environment. In short, we had prepared the field for seeds to be planted, but when it came time to plant the seeds, we did not have access to the appropriate resources.

VIII.

“Sound Like Ya’ll Tried To Do Too Much, Too Soon”

We did a five-year business plan that satisfied two banks that our project was viable. As noted, we assumed that the Ohio State Legislature would approve a Pilot Project for School Vouchers for the 1995-96 school year. Indeed, there was really no way to make the business viable beyond the first year without the program. To position our school to be selected as part of the Pilot Voucher Program, we had conversations and visits from a variety of state legislators, city-council members, and of course the media.

The White media in and around Cincinnati did a number of very positive stories about *The Academy*. Clearly conservative White politicians talked up what we were doing, and, in general we enjoyed good press. Africana leadership and media were reluctant to show their support. They took a wait and see attitude--a strange stance to be sure, rather like a community watching a new born child to see if it will live instead of doing what was necessary to make sure that the child lived.

On the issue of our attempting to do too much, too soon, I can only say that any business venture is a gamble. We did all we could do to make *The Academy* work, but it was not to be. I am writing a separate piece in another book that deals with the appropriate union between Tehuti (wisdom, and God's Will) and Herukhuti (force, and entrepreneurial wherewithal), and in that discussion I will explore how to build lasting institutions.

IX.

Friends of The African American Academy

The contemporary resurrection of Black Studies altered higher education. It challenged Eurocentric hegemony in the areas of teaching, research and service. For the first time, the triad of teaching, research and service were considered in terms of the various Africana communities. There were numerous attempts to make university resources serve Africana communities. Indeed, the motto for The National Council for Black Studies is *Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility*. From the organization's inception, there was a desire for Black Studies to play an active role in the Africana community. It was of course this that inspired the idea of an Africentric laboratory school.

Within the framework of *Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility*, we created a national advisory board for *The Academy* and they were called *The Friends of the African American Academy*. That group included William "Nick" Nelson, Carol Sheffield, James B. Stewart, and Al Young. Ra Un Neefer Amen and Molefi Asante lent their name and support to our efforts. Nelson, Sheffield, Stewart and Young were active contributors. In many ways, they were responsible for indirectly assuring that *The Academy* would have a second year of existence. The particulars follow: at the end of the first year, I invited *The Friends* down for a visit to familiarize them with the day to day operations of *The Academy*, and to discuss our prospects for the next year. We invited the Parish Priest with whom I had worked to negotiate the lease for the property. One of the goals *The Friends of the African American Academy* devised from the information I shared was the necessity of our owing the school outright--either through a below market value purchase, or through a donation.

James Stewart, who was then Vice Provost for Equity at The Pennsylvania State University and Nick Nelson, a Research Professor of Black Studies and Political Science at The Ohio State University, made our case to the Parish Priest. In a wonderfully Africentric version of good cop, bad cop, they alternately suggested that the property be donated to *The Center for African World Studies, Inc.*, (CAWS was a tax-exempt, 501-3C corporation) or that it be sold to us at a below-market value amount. The Priest was clearly dazzled, and if he had the power—that resided with the Archbishop—I am sure he would have acted positively on the suggestions being made. While we did not get the property, the active involvement of *The Friends of The African American Academy* provided our efforts with a new level of legitimacy. No longer were we seen as struggling local operation; rather, we were hooked into some clearly influential people in higher education. I am quite sure that when the Parish Priest reported back to the

Archdiocese as to what we were up to, he did so with a greater amount of confidence in our ability to succeed.

Nick Nelson, Carol Sheffield, Jim Stewart, and Al Young came to Cincinnati, Ohio as *Friends of The African American Academy*. They came without any remuneration, and without fanfare. They came to work, and to assist in building an institution to benefit African people. While I am grateful at a personal level for their contribution to our specific effort, I am more grateful for the example of what their contribution means. More African academics need to be involved in creating and supporting efforts like *The African American Academy*.

There is no shortage of talent within African communities, and with the appropriate consciousness, there is really no shortage of resources. I am convinced that the larger project we envisioned--creating a global Africentric School System--is imminently doable. *The Friends of The African American Academy* represent the tip of the iceberg of possibility.

X.

Conclusions and Beginnings

The African American Academy was not rationally conceived. Like all attempts to contribute to the forward flow of human history that are formulated by an unobstructed will, our efforts were divinely conceived. And just as matter cannot be created or destroyed, *The African American Academy* remains in spirit, enveloped in the Waters of *Nu*.. When it is time for it to manifest again in the mundane world, it will do so.