

# On Being African American

**C**olored, Negro, Black, Afro-American, African-American—which of these names describes you? Have you thought about it? Does it really matter? Have you stopped to give any thought as to how others perceive you? How you perceive yourself? The question of identity is important for any people who are determined to build the sense of ethnic solidarity necessary for positive progression. Those who have not clearly and properly identified themselves are subject to yielding the right of definition and direction to outside forces.

As the New Generation of African-Americans, you face a two-fold challenge—to know yourselves and your culture, and to take steps to preserve that cultural identity.

## Knowing Ourselves

For any ethnic group to be healthy, whole and productive, that by which they identify themselves must reflect their genuine origin, culture, values and traditions. Invoking a name carries with it the power of character. What we ultimately call ourselves will determine what we will do and become in the future. How we define ourselves will determine our limits and possibilities. The ultimate liberation of a people comes when they control the definition of themselves and what they seek to be called. It is no wonder that one of the first things Europeans did to our African ancestors was to force them to change their names and forget their language. Erasing our languages led to the redefinition of our personhood and the modification of our culture on the American soil, thus beginning our long journey

through a midnight of slavery and second class citizenship. Forced to act in such a way to always appease "the overseer," many of our ancestors went along to get along. At the same time, they dreamed of a day when their children and their children's children would not have to experience what W.E.B. Dubois called "our twoness."

And yet in the midst of this seemingly hopeless condition, moving from nigger to colored, to Negro, to Black, we have now reached a level at which we can begin to liberate ourselves from "our twoness," and reclaim what was taken from our ancestors on the shores of our ancestral homeland: our identity as an AFRICAN people. We can begin to understand in a deeper sense the meaning of our painful pilgrimage to American citizenship.

Who, then, are we? We are an African people of American citizenship. We are a hyphenated people, like our fellow citizens—Polish-American, Mexican-American, Irish-American, Arab-American, Scottish-American. And yet, because of the repressive nature of slavery and racism, we have not been able to pass down from generation to generation the meaning of our culture, the history of our people, the traditions of our elders or the wealth of our labor. While our presence in this country doubles and even triples that of many of our fellow citizens whose parents and grandparents came over as immigrants during "the European Exodus," our social, economic, and political development lags far behind.

Deeply aware of the thousands of

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## The Challenge of a New Generation

by Clarence E. Glover, Jr.



Clarence Glover

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W.E.B. DuBois



Mary McLeod Bethune



George Washington Carver



Carter G. Woodson

commentaries written on the plight of our people, I approach this article with a great deal of concern and care. What can be said that can ultimately make a difference for our people? I dare not venture down the traditional paths of political, educational, or economic analysis, attempting to expose only the need to get involved, go to school, or get a job. My efforts, however, shall be focused on the foundation upon which the success of all of these areas is built, which is the basic question of identity. Without a clear understanding of who we are as individuals or as a people, we run the risk of suffering from personal and collective cultural amnesia—unable to clearly focus on our future because we have forgotten our past.

If we are an African people of American citizenship, what does this mean for us as we face the year 2000 and beyond? It means that we must develop a positive understanding of our African heritage, an understanding that will transform the stereotype of our ancestral homeland as a dark backward continent, void of significant history and culture. We must realize that Africa is the birthplace of humanity and the propagator of a great people who bequeathed to the world science, math, astrology, religion, and governmental systems. We must also develop a deeper appreciation of our genetic makeup, which alone can encompass the rainbow of the human family, ranging from "ink to pink." This understanding must lead us away from the blind biases we have of our brothers and sisters from the African continent today, and guide us toward embracing them as kin who have only been separated by time and distance. Neither should Africans from the continent allow their perceptions of us as African-Americans to be scarred by the temporary conditions of slavery and colonialism, but rather should look to the future with us as a people of common heritage. Long past is the time that we view each other from distant points of reference. The call

for the New Generation should be "All Africans Unite."

To understand the heritage we have been forced to forget, we must engage in an extensive re-education process. As Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the father of African-American history, made us aware, we are a "mis-educated people in need of re-education." The New Generation must come to realize the difference between "education" and "training." Truly educated people have a sense of their history and humanity, and are able to apply the lessons of history to their contemporary conditions. On the other hand, people who have only been trained lack the necessary historical perspectives to enhance their lives or the lives of their progeny. They fall victim to those who construct for them an image of their past that is self-destructive for their present, thus limiting their future. But now because the New Generation does not suffer from the chains of chattel slavery, or feel the degrading classification of second class citizenship, they have an opportunity and responsibility to take up the new liberation struggle. That struggle is "Intellectual Militancy"—a militancy that demands not only a mastery of the early three "R's": "reading, riting, and rithmetic," but also the mastery of what I call the new three "R's": Reconstruction, Rethinking, and Redirection.

We must seek to reconstruct the meaning of our past. We can start by reading the right literature. While there are many books and periodicals to choose from, one can begin with some of the basics, such as, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, by Chancellor Williams, *Stolen Legacy*, by George G. M. James, *Before the Mayflower*, by Lerone Bennett, *The African Presence in Ancient America: They Came Before Columbus*, and *Blacks in Science* by Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, *The Black Scholar Journal*, and

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Rosa Parks arrested after refusing to sit at the back of a Montgomery, Alabama bus, 1955; Slave auction in New Orleans; African-Americans taking to the streets for their rights



*African News.* These books and periodicals, while a treasure chest of knowledge on Africa and African-American history and culture, may be difficult to find in public or school libraries. You may do well to seek out African-American bookstores in your city or in other cities. Of one thing you can be certain: Once discovered, they will only be the beginning of a life of new discoveries about yourself and your people. No African-American home should be without a collection of these and other books and periodicals about our people. Care should be taken to select African or African-American authors or other authors who are genuinely sensitive to our history and culture.

Not only must we reconstruct the past, we must also be about the serious task of re-thinking our present condition. To do this

we must seek to establish principles of individual and collective respect. No longer can we



afford to live in vacuums. There must be a reestablishment of "the extended family" and the values that constitute it. We must nurture kinship ties between those who are our kin by birth and by heritage. We must work to rid ourselves of the destructive concept of "I" or "me" and rediscover the power in "we" and "us." We must once again extend with warm affection the greetings of "brother" or "sister" and reclaim our role as being each other's keeper.

If we are to re-think our present condition we must dare to listen to our elders. We cannot afford to let the worth of their knowledge escape us with the passing of time. The New Generation must lend a listening ear to The Old Generation, in an effort to continue the struggle until we have reached total liberation. The time we devote to our elders will prove to be of invaluable importance. As the New Generation listens to the Old Generation, they become bridge builders for tomorrow—passing, preserving and protecting those valuable principles necessary for the continual life of our people.

### Preserving Our Identity

America is not a "melting pot" but a "stew pot" of distinctive cultures. We, like other cultures, must make sure that the genuineness of our contributions are not overshadowed with racism, segregation, or discrimination. If we do not retain such things as jazz, spirituals, gospel, gumbo, yams, braids, and even rapping and other forms of cultural expressions as authentically ours, history may record them as someone else's creation.

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Head of statue of Amenemhet III,  
Twelfth Dynasty, Egypt

We also need to patronize African-American museums and cultural societies, and invest in Black art.

We must with careful precision work to redirect the future of African people everywhere. Like a keen mathematician, we must calculate our every move, being sure to include the proper variables necessary to our total success. This implies our move-

ment through educational institutions, political systems, religious organizations and economic structures. We must use the result of the first two efforts, reconstruction and rethinking, to chart a clear and sure course for the future, one that is built on a firm foundation of educational, political, religious and economic values. Our actions today and tomorrow must be the collective results of informed, liberated minds, capable of building and sustaining liberating institutions.

Today's generation of African-Americans are a gifted and blessed generation. Many have been privileged to rise above the pits of perpetual pity, and have seen the sunlight of new opportunity. But, these African-Americans, the lawyers, doctors, educators, engineers, entrepreneurs and scientists, those who W.E.B. DuBois called "the talented tenth," must not just bathe in the sunlight of their success. Rather they must dare to reach back into the shadows of our struggle and bring forth those yet struggling, always remembering that each person's success is built on someone else's shoulder. For college students, "reaching back" can mean devoting time to tutoring and mentoring younger students, or getting involved in socio-political issues such as the anti-apartheid movement.

Today the voices of our ancestors cry to us from the graves. They seek to know, "What will become of this new generation?" Will it go forward to rekindle the bright flame of our glorious past? Or will we allow the sins of our own selfishness to blow out the light that leads to our future? The challenge is ours and the time is NOW!

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