

YOU CAN'T MOVE TO 'B', IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE 'A' IS

By Kalamu ya Salaam/AHIDIANA (ca. 1986)

The central focus of our concern seems to be where to go from here. However, I suggest that we should shift back a second and reexamine exactly where “here” is. I believe that what seems to be a lack of direction has its origin in the fact that there is a lack of central cohesion – that is we are not on the same track, so consequently any move we make tends to scatter us further apart rather than bring us together.

WHERE WE AT. When we started our organization and on up through the first five years there was a commonality of interest, a commonality of general beliefs, and a large and nationwide movement of which we were an active part. Today, however, this cement no longer holds and thus what we face now is the stark reality of different levels of reality and development. Part of this reality is due to changed conditions, such as fourteen plus children, which did not exist when we started. Briefly, some of the significant aspects of our current reality, as I see it, are: Different levels of economic security, Different levels of political development, Different levels of personal development, and Different ideological orientation.

Different levels of economic security. Initially, we were all economically in roughly the same category and had approximately the same or similar amounts of financial income and stability. As we survey our organization today, we see that there is a sharp difference among us. This difference is a reflection of the economic reality of our people in America today. According to government reports, there is a visibly and measurably large increase in the number of African-Americans whose personal income has risen above the \$15,400 median income mark, but at the same time there has also been an even larger increase in the number of African-Americans below this median income mark. What has happened is that there has been a shifting of our people to either end of the middle class/poverty pole, large numbers of us bunched up at either end (the overwhelming majority being at the poverty end.)

I believe that this sharp economic divide affects the perception, reasoning and emotions of those on either side of the line. For example, those of us who are economically more secure

tend to see numerous possibilities for programs and action, and tend to discount money as a limiting factor. Yet, others of us who are not economically secure, have the tendency to view situations quite differently.

Different levels of political development. The political development I am speaking of here might better be expressed by the phrase “maturity in movement work”. Over the last decade some of us have actively worked with various organizations, worked on various projects and programs, and become acquainted with, knowledgeable of, and friends with a large number of personalities associated with the Black liberation struggle. At the same time, this process was a deepening of political ties and understanding for those of us who had previously been involved in movement work. As a result, there is a gap in our appreciation of what Ahidiana activities have meant.

Another distinction concerning political development is the fact that some of us came to Ahidiana with a background of previous political work, others of us came with no such background. Thus, our political development is fundamentally different, in that for some Ahidiana is the sum total of our work and for others it is but one aspect of our work. This difference produces divergent views of both our effectiveness as an organization and the importance of our work in the overall context of the Black liberation movement.

A third level of divergence of political development is the fact that for the less developed among us, the personalities of the Black liberation movement have become at best acquaintances and generally are only “people we know of” or have “met” once or twice. On the other hand, some of us have moved to varying levels of comradery and/or friendship with movement personalities. What this means is that access to information and opportunities to share knowledge and resources is markedly different between those who “know” and those who “know of”.

A fourth distinction in terms of political development is that theoretical work becomes a necessary guide to action for those of us who are active on a day to day basis in political work. For others of us, theoretical work becomes abstract and often boring task. Some examples of

this theoretical work are intensive and consistent reading, attendance at and discussion with movement activities and programs.

The final distinction I would like to point out (although certainly not the final distinction that exists) is that politically developed people tend to have a broad interest in political activities that are not necessarily made up in the majority of African-American people, and also value and tend to make connections between various movements and the Black liberation movement. Other people who are not as politically developed do not often share this broad interest and seldom see the interrelatedness or importance of interfacing with other political movements.

I believe that these political differences have led us to a point of frustration with each other and collective inaction. We find it difficult to agree upon activities and programs. Additionally, when we do agree our commitment and work varies in direct proportion to how important we think or feel the agreed upon activity is.

Different levels of personal development. In my view, this is a particularly important difference which has, to a large extent, grown directly out of our differences economically and politically. By personal development I mean our levels of educational, emotional and career development. Educationally, there are broad differences in the skills and knowledges we have acquired as individual members of our organization. In the day to day world of work and survival, this has meant a difference in our access to employment, material possessions, and material resources to use however we will. There is another aspect to our educational development, and that has to do with our acquiring of knowledge and skills useful in the struggle for national liberation. Unfortunately, here to there is a broad gap that tends to separate members of our organization.

On the emotional level, although it is difficult to generalize without confusing what we are attempting to clarify, I think it is consistent with reality to point out that what has sometimes been identified as “articulate” versus “non-articulate” people, is really an example of the differences between those who feel emotionally secure and mature and those who feel that they have not yet developed their identity and feel “uneasy”, “dominated”, “suppressed”, by other people. It is not easy to discuss this difference because those who are most willing

and most comfortable discussing the differences are generally those who are emotionally developed, and thus the very discussion of the issue seems to become a put-down of those who are not fully developed emotionally. But, in my opinion, this is a very real difference which leads to frustration and, too often, to inactivity.

I also think that our recent attention to the question of sexism and the development of women have caused us unforeseen problems precisely because whereas we could be unemotional about our denouncement of racism and capitalism as the enemy was external to our collective and individual selves, the question of sexism and the development of women calls for a battle with an enemy that is often collectively and individually internal – in many cases our own behavior and ideas was under attack. The call for change necessitated changing not the “whites” or our physical environment, but our own selves and our own modes of social relationships, particularly with those who were closest to us, i.e. our mates.

The third vector of personal development is our career development. It is one thing to have a job and quite another to have a career or profession that is a life-long pursuit. Again, within the organization there are sharp differences between those of us who simply have jobs and those who have a self-selected career that we are pursuing. Additionally, our levels of achievement on the job and within our professions is different. This introduces another line of demarcation. Some of us look forward to each workday and think often of the various activities we plan to do at the end of our workday we feel a sense of accomplishment which nurtures a feeling of self-worth. For others of us, each day is just another day which does not bring us any self-satisfaction except a paycheck on pay day.

I think we would be in error to minimize the effect of different levels of personal development on our views and feelings about Ahidiana, which is a voluntary organization that requires tremendous expenditures of resources, time, energy and emotion over and beyond whatever else we have to do on a day to day basis for the necessities of life.

Finally, I think a splitting factor in our organization is fundamentally different ideological orientations. Among some of us, ideology and its development are a central concern and we tend to attempt to use it as a guide for action and interpersonal relationships. For others of us,

ideology is not the cutting edge of our decision making about how we will lead our lives. Some of us tend towards a liberal view of development which is a view which attempts to minimize conflict, and seeks to maintain the status quo, make compromises, and keep everybody happy. Others of us take a dialectical view of development which is a view which finds the resolution of conflict in either the dominance of one force over another or the creation of a third and new force, which is constantly seeking to create new forms of social relationships and material existences rather than maintain what previously existed, tends to “choose sides”, and pushes for adherence to goals without the requirement of everybody being “happy” about the outcome or movement.

Although, I think there is much more to ideological differences, I think the point is adequately made. Assuming that there is some truth in what has been presented, the immediate question is “so what’s next, where do we go from here?”

I think the first step we should take is an agreement on where we are. We must face our problems squarely, we must identify them, discuss them and then we can propose solution to them. This paper is an initial attempt at an assessment of where we stand, let us complete this process and then, I think, we will be in a better position to propose solutions to our problems.