

ON REMEMBERING AHIDIANA

by Mtumishi St. Julien (original in 1995; edited 2019)

It all began in college. We were children of the 60's who had seen the anger and indignation our parents felt because of "white/colored" restrooms, not being able to eat at lunch counters, back seats of buses, back doors and balconies, inadequate funds for black schools. The retail outlets on Canal Street (there were no shopping centers yet) would not let blacks try on clothes to see if they would fit. You could not return them if they didn't fit.

On the nightly news we saw Rev. Avery Alexander dragged down the stairs of City Hall feet first because he tried to get something to eat in the cafeteria there. We saw Oretha Haley and other students "sit in" Woolworths on Canal and Rampart because they could not get served. We saw the marches, speeches, firehoses, dogs, and beatings characterizing the struggles of the sixties to vote, to have equal access to public facilities, to have equal access to education. Dr. King, Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown and the multitudes of courageous black folks struggling for freedom were seen nightly on tv. We were just small children and could not get involved.

When we got to college we wanted to make just as valiant a contribution. We became suspicious of integration and realized that power was the way to remove the culture of dehumanization which America had imposed on African Americans. Being close (integrated) to white people could not produce freedom and humanization. Only access to resources and power to control our own destiny could do that. We learned from Malcolm X that African American people must struggle on the world stage; not merely around our local interests. These ideas were reinforced and nourished by avid reading. Frederick Douglas, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson, Mary McLeod Bethune among many others gave us the ideological framework in which to study and work. We were also introduced to the Nguzo Saba and Kwanzaa. We learned that the real crisis in the African American community was a culture crisis...a cultural revolution was needed. This thesis was reinforced by Elijah Muhammad, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Mao Tse Tung and our personal contacts and discussions with Dr. Maulana Karenga, Haki Madhubuthi, Sonia Sanchez, Imari Obadele and many many more. Reading, discussion, debate and study became the center focus of our lives.

We had no choice but to struggle for a more relevant curricula in college. We struggled for self-determination in the educational process. We struggled against university administrators who attempted to preserve the status quo, i.e., education to produce 'safe negroes' (a derogatory term in the 70's), and apologists for American history and culture. Even though many successes were achieved we felt we needed to do more. By reading Fanon, Cabral, Frere and Karenga we came to the conclusion that education of our children was key to making real and positive change in our people.

Understanding the ideas of these modern giants, we became impatient with study alone, void of work. So in 1971 we started Dokpwe Work/Study Center. We also shared the belief that "work, devoid of study, is meaningless". This belief also led us to set up a cadre (closely knit group of persons committed to make change). The indispensable interrelationship between work and study guided our lives.

The growing relationship of the cadre members, study and zeal led to the formation of Ahidiana (1973). We wanted the school to be a base for broader struggle rather than merely a school. Other co-workers at Dokpwe were satisfied with a central focus on education. Since there was certainly a need in the community for more schools, we took the opportunity to start Ahidiana Work/Study Center. Ahidiana is a Kiswahili word meaning "mutual agreement". The name was derived from our pledge or mutual agreement.

At Ahidiana we expressed our love for each other through shared work for the community. We brought into the city many of our key African American thinkers and activists. We organized yearly Kwanzaa events, African Liberation Day celebrations, the Louisiana Black Assembly, Free Gary Tyler rallies, Media Watch and anti-police brutality protests. We picketed and demonstrated in support of the struggles of our people in Southern Africa. We organized women's conferences to promote equal opportunities for women. We used the media very effectively to educate the community about important issues concerning African American development. We opened a book store, printing and publishing business and supported each other through collective buying.

During this time our children were born, and our work became more important to us than ever before. Since reshaping the views and values of our people was to us the essence of positive change, shaping the views and values of the children to become strong leaders and workers for our people was the minimum contribution we could make.

Without academic degrees we pushed forward. We used Kuumba (Creativity) and Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility) to build our educational program. Rather than copy other school programs, we studied and then created our own using Kujichagulia (Self-Determination). We joined the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) to foster greater cooperation and communication among independent African American schools like Ahidiana all over the country. We helped it develop and grow. Our teachers helped to train other teachers. Our quest to build a national African American educational system culminated in a study excursion to the People's Republic of China to explore the Chinese educational models in July 1977.

We gave our very best to the children in our care in the spirit of preparing strong positive leaders and workers for our people. We gave our best to the community through Ahidiana. Unfortunately, in early 1982 we dissolved the organization. The school continued until February of 1987.

Why we were unable to continue is left for honest and thoughtful evaluation. We should get to that in other forums. The most important message here is that we tried

then and continue to try to do our very best to contribute to our people. We did make positive change in the lives of many many people because of the school, our community activities, our example and writings. We are proud of that. But most of all we are proud of the children, who they have become and the contributions they are making.

So by leaving our writings and example to you, we leave a legacy of hope that the world will be a better place than when we entered it; we give you our faith that by living the views and values we tried to teach at Ahidiana, you too will reach a successful and fulfilling life; and we give you our passionate commitment to inspire you to make a positive difference in the lives of our people as we have attempted to do.