

AHIDIANA: A Personal Source of Inspiration

An Excerpt from *It's Our Times: Ella Baker, Participatory Democracy, and Oakland, California*, by Kweli Tutashinda, 2013, Imhotep Publishing, Berkley, California

The last source of inspiration comes from my involvement with a Pan African Nationalist organization thirty years ago. From 1979-1981, I worked with a collective called Ahidiana in New Orleans, LA. I had met them the year before when two cousins and I attended our first Kwanzaa there hosted by them. The organization was based in the lower ninth ward, the poorest section of the city and the area left devastated by Katrina in 2005. They operated an elementary school and bookstore, published, printed, and bound books and magazines, and led many community-organizing campaigns over a fourteen-year period from 1973-1986. The members were largely a collective of local New Orleanians who had been student activists in the sixties and early seventies. People like Kalamu ya Salaam, Tayari kwa Salaam, Mtumishi and Shawishi St. Julien, Keith and Daphne Ferdinand, Nilima Mwendu, Kuumba Na Kazi, Ua Na Kazi, Ukali Mwendu, Kwaku Owusu, Adimu Owusu and Mwindaji ya Kweli had been activists for years. Some had been Civil Rights movement participants, influenced by liberation Theology as well as members of blackartsouth, which was a theatre group that used political discourse and poetry as a means of education and community organizing. It grew out of Free Southern Theatre, which was the artistic arm of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee or SNCC. Both Free Southern Theatre and blackartsouth were vital parts of the Black Arts Movement that accompanied and grew out of the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement. (1)

Within Ahidiana, there were no leaders, although there was leadership (Kalamu, Tayari, Mtumishi, and Kuumba in particular). Everyone had an equal

voice, even I, at age 22, the youngest member at the time of my involvement. To become a member, new members had to study and discuss political ideas with each family unit over a 6-to-8-week period. When I joined there were three others, Patana Usuni, Nana Namtambu, and Adenike Olujumoke, joining as well. Wide ranging discussions would ensue, and independent thinking was greatly encouraged.

As an organization, Ahidiana members organized and demonstrated against Apartheid in South Africa, nuclear power in Baton Rouge, worked with local artists and musicians to gain a more equitable share of the tourist economy, organized residents of the poorest projects in New Orleans to fight police brutality, staged an effective yearlong boycott of the downtown business district, and had face to face confrontations with both police and David Duke's Ku Klux Klan (hiding behind the name, the National Association for the Advancement of White People, NAAWP). We organized one of the first Black Women's Conferences in the nation that featured poet/activist Sonia Sanchez and writer/thinker, Toni Cade Bambara. We studied the seminal work of James and Grace Lee Boggs, in particular, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*. It was a history and analysis of twentieth century revolutions that advanced the idea that the second American Revolution will require people to eliminate conspicuous consumption and re-evaluate what it means to be human.

We read the essays of Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source*, where he articulated the relationship of philosophy and culture to struggle in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde Islands, West Africa. We also read Maulana Karenga's penetrating analysis of the Black Power and Left Movements up to that time, in *Essays on Struggle*. We talked with revolutionary David Sibeko of South African organization, PAC, or Pan African Congress of Azania. He had just come from the United Nations delivering a speech about their struggle against apartheid

and met with us in New Orleans. Several weeks later, he was murdered in South Africa. Known as the “Malcolm X of Africa”, he was forty-one years old.

In Ahidiana there was no dogmatism, and they never used the word, vanguard. By the time I became affiliated with the group, they had worked out a very effective and politically sophisticated meeting format that included financial business, political agendas, coalition work, publishing plans, school curriculum, collective food buying decisions, and constructive criticism. In fact, it was the constructive criticism sessions that were most impressive. *Up to that time and in my experience since, most people involved in political work have a hard time hearing any opposing viewpoint, let alone criticism. But constructive criticism done with sensitivity can be very beneficial for a group.* That experience laid the foundation for me to be able to appreciate the depth and genius of Ella Baker. I realize now, that indirectly, some of that experience in Ahidiana is part of her legacy through her influence on SNCC expressed through Free Southern Theatre and blackartsouth down to Ahidiana. Additionally, those experiences helped me better understand the history of those movements and their relationship to the movements of today. Even though I left to come west in 1981, those experiences confirmed for me that collective, non-hierarchical, consensus-based organizations and movements are going to be vital for future struggles.