

# In Memoriam for Abdias do Nascimento 1914-2011

by

Molefi Kete Asante, Ph.D.  
Professor, Department of African American Studies  
Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
[asante@temple.edu](mailto:asante@temple.edu)

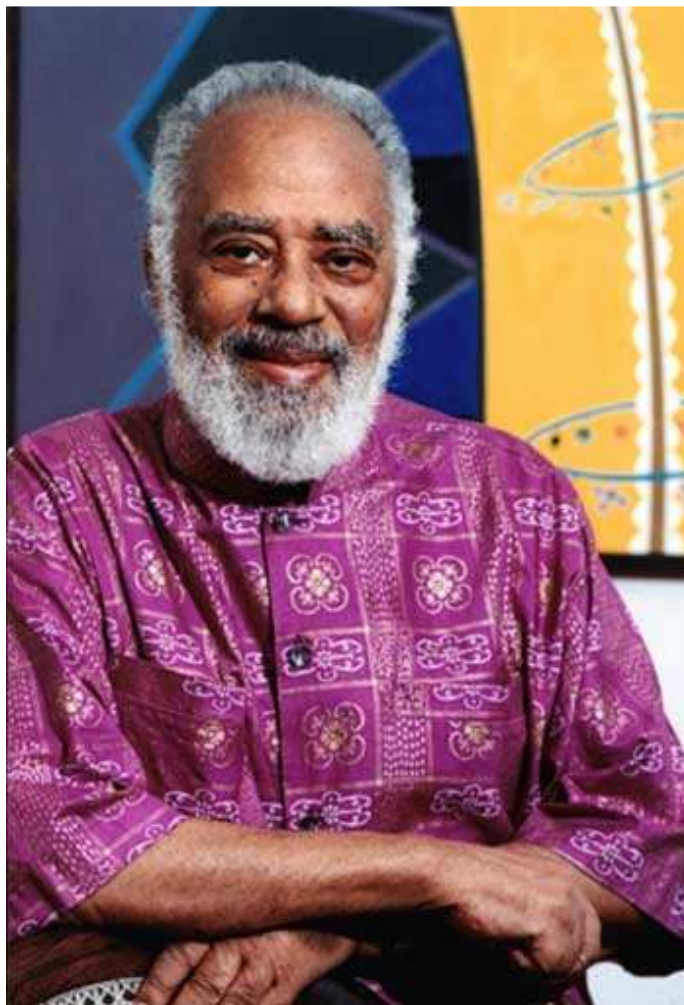


Photo: Bia Zacarelli Parreiras

Seven years ago I went to Rio de Janeiro to speak on the occasion of Abdias do Nascimento's 90th birthday. He repaid the honor by coming to my 65th birthday symposium three years ago at the age of 94. It was an emotional meeting captured on camera as I cried like a baby that this great man had come to Philadelphia for the occasion of my birthday. So today I pay homage to this brother genius who has cherished our history and culture and who has made the life and struggle of the African Brazilian people his personal mission.

And yet I know that the imperishability of his career, the elevated nature of his commitment to humanity, the sacred ceremony of his love for the *orishas*, and his devotion to art and literature mark him as one of the greatest humans of his time. Indeed, I have been struck by the way he managed to carve out his persona in the midst of a multitude of illusions, images, and situations.

It is rare for a human being, without the control of the media and its popular diversions, to rise above all of the noise of his or her time and stand out as a unique human being.

Abdias do Nascimento defended the oppressed, advanced creativity, sought human community and made our lives better by his art, reason, emotion, and laughter. I danced with him when he was in Buffalo and I ate his Brazilian dishes when he lived as an expatriate.

For nearly forty years Abdias was my teacher. That is why when I received the news of his transition there was nothing more for me than to write in my own voice about the works of this marvelous man. Abdias was Brazilian, but he belonged to the African world. We claimed him in the United States; they claimed him in Mexico; he was claimed in Nigeria; they spoke of him as belonging to them in Ghana; the Angolans and Mozambicans called his name fondly as one of theirs. All over the African world his name was written in the bosom of the people. Abdias' name must be included among the most eminent of Africans, alongside those of Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X, and Cheikh Anta Diop. Brazil has been alert enough to honor him in a way that projects Brazil into leadership in the African world.

I met Abdias do Nascimento, son of Brazil, son of Africa, son of the world, when I took a professorship at the State University of New York in Buffalo in 1973. One could not miss his grand character, his immense popularity as a professor, and his enormous smile. When I stood in his presence I knew even at that time that I was in the presence of magnificence. What is it to be warmed by the sun but to feel a sentiment of comfort and security that everything will be all right now that you are touched by the radiance of its brightness?

All people, in every country and of every nation, have identified individuals who deserve to be celebrated and praised for the work that they are doing and have done. The names of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Amenitoshaka, Yanga, and a thousand others sing out from the panoply of heaven in witness to Abdias' life.

We elevate ourselves and commemorate the illustrious creativity of our most shining star when we bathe in Nascimento's halo. . If you call it self-love, because we celebrate ourselves when we celebrate the best of us, then it is a type of self-love that makes us honor a sharp mind and a constant activist. Whatever our attributes, our desires, our ambitions for ourselves and the world they all come together in the character of Abdias, a monument of brilliance, and an icon of victory.

In my judgment there has never lived an African in the Americas with a more instinctive understanding of the nature of our African culture. In that, Nascimento was alone, among the likes of Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Aime Cesaire, Leon Damas, Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul Robeson, Jacques Roumain, Nicolas Guillen, and Langston Hughes. No male leader has captured the essence of our history and culture so plainly and powerfully as Nascimento. Of course, we know that Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Zora Neale Hurston, and other women, may have been much more attuned to the intricacies of culture than many men. However, Nascimento brought his strong passions to his love for our culture and our creativity. This was one of his greatest gifts to us. When I have seen him talk at Lagos, in Washington, in New York, and other places I always left his presence thinking that there was no need to worry because Nascimento knew that we walked the way of a revitalized world and with his leadership we could truly find ourselves.

Abdias do Nascimento was not only a major force in African Brazilian culture and politics; he was a world figure who started his career in the 1930s. When he founded the Black Experimental Theater in 1944 he immersed himself in every aspect of the history and life of the African in Brazil. But he wanted to know more, to do more, and therefore his interests expanded to other countries where blacks lived as he made alliances with the writers, artists, and intellectuals in other South American countries. Soon he was to take his wisdom, dramatic arts, and cultural knowledge and practice to North America where he made a significant impact on the African community in the United States. But his first love was always his Brazilian family, his community, his people who had been so violated by history and circumstances that they had often forgotten their own history and their own need to gain their victory over the degradation of the West.

Abdias' life is the victory.

I believe that Africa spoke to him like an oracle. Why do I believe this? If a continent could speak, if it had its voice, it would say that African Brazilians had to find their way back home in their minds and souls. Nascimento heard what the continent wished to say. He interpreted the voice of the continent through his essays, paintings, and poems. He became for thousands of people outside of Brazil the purest voice of the African Brazilian. In this, we were lucky. Yes, because Abdias' voice was the dynamic voice at international gatherings of Africans in Ouagadougou, in Lagos, in Dar es Salaam, in New York, the black people of Brazil had an eloquent and dramatic voice on the stage of African history.

What is the place of Nascimento in the African world? If you were to look at Nascimento in the continuum of African giants where would you put him? How would you articulate his importance to the global discourse on the question of African consciousness? In the world of ideas we are often confronted with new theories but the enduring quality of Abadias' work is its ability to anticipate every turn, every nuance of the African world.

There is something universal in Nascimento. He traveled to any society and was immediately at home. He was Nigerian, Senegalese, North American, but he was really Brazilian. Actually, it was the human quality that made him so much a part of the rest of the world. He did not come with the calling cards of capitalism, imperialism, or globalization. Rather Nascimento approached the world with human rights, equality, and mutual respect for all cultures.

He was our champion. There was no one in Brazil or the United States like him. His spirit stood out from the pack, undaunted, unbowed, and straightforward.

Who was Abdias do Nascimento? Asked a young Salvadorean. He was a playwright and dramatist, said one who had read and seen *Sortilege*. This play which Nascimento wrote and produced at the Black Experimental Theater in Rio de Janeiro in the 1940s "as an exigency of the lamentable situation in which black people found themselves in Brazilian society" (Nascimento, *Sortilege*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1978, p. 1) is still seen as one of the most creative works ever done on the modern stage. Indeed, the theater itself was a center for the affirmation of African cultural values, and in that regard, it was an institution that forced a progressive stand in relationship to the condition of the people. So it is true that Nascimento was a dramatist. But who is Abdias do Nascimento?

He was a poet, said a young lady from Sao Paulo. This son of Dona Josina Georgina and Jose Ferreira do Nascimento was the author of *Axes Do Sangue E Da Esperancs, orikis*. Yes, he was a great poet, one who memorialized the orishas: Exu, Ogum, Yemanja, Oya, Shango, Oshun, Obatala, Ochosi. He named and honored his parents, his wife, the women in his life, his children, his comrades, and his close friends. He was a poet who celebrated the iconic value of Ausar and Auset. He was one who elevated the masses of Angola, South Africa, and Mozambique and in his poetry willed them to overthrow oppression. But who was Abdias do Nascimento?

He was a historian who chronicled his own time. Nascimento was always an advocate for African Brazilians. He wrote *Sitiado em Lagos* and *Povo Negro* as political history and as political philosophy. But these were only two of the more than 30 publications of this artist who was a man of science, this social scientist and historian who was a creative artist, this chronicler who reached back and found in our past the necessary principles for our future.

Perhaps *Mixture or Massacre: Essays in the Genocide of a Black People* was one of the most penetrating works ever done on racial politics in Brazil. It introduced Nascimento to the North American audience as a thinker with a passion for truth. We are presented with the heroes of Brazilian history: Luis Gama, Jose do Patricinio, Joao Candido, and Luisa Mahin. There were others and Nascimento never tired of telling the world about them and the heroic deeds they did in the interest of black freedom.

Protests against discrimination in employment, housing, schooling, hotels, the military and diplomatic services, fueled Nascimento's eagerness to become a voice for the people without a voice. So, who was Nascimento? He was a political leader, a force for social justice and peace, a senator and a minister.

Who was this man born in Franca, Sao Paulo on March 14, 1914?

If we write the history of resistance to oppression in Brazil we must write the names of Abdias do Nascimento, Leila Gonzales, Guerreiro Ramos, and Nelson Rodrigues as compatriots in the struggle for cultural, psychological, and economic liberation for the African Brazilian people. Nascimento headed the list.

Nascimento claimed the history of the African Brazilian people when he took the *Quilombos* and made them models of an African Brazilian response to the human condition. This was an Afrocentric thrust into the meaning of our presence in the Americas. It was a statement, a position, a proposition of resistance and victory. He taught us that the Portuguese and Spanish slave owners were just as harsh, just as brutal, and just as wicked as the English enslavers.

The magnificent literary and artistic career of Nascimento remains the standard by which we will always compare geniuses. My big brother, and dear friend, stood with and by Wole Soyinka, C. L. R. James, Maulana Karenga, Paulo Freire, John Henrik Clarke, Leila Gonzales, Rodrigo Alves, and Guerreiro Ramos. They are some of the key figures in the resurgence of Africa, but Nascimento is not lost in that list of greatness.

If I were asked to name a great artist, Nascimento would come to my mind. If I were asked to identify a man who dedicated his life to the liberation of the oppressed, I would have to put Nascimento on the list of names at the very top. If I were asked to name a great creative dramatist and founder of theatre, no one would come before the name of Nascimento.

What Abdias taught was that we carry our own weight. There is no universality that obliterates our identity; true universality builds upon identity until it incorporates all identities. Only in this way do we find our own singularity. When I think of the rise of African consciousness in the world, I think, of course, of the Negritude poets, of Bantu Steve Biko, of Maulana Karenga and Kawaida philosophy, and the apostle of *Quilombismo*, Abdias do Nascimento.

I did not arrive at the conclusion that it was necessary for all Africans everywhere to have a sense of agency without the advise, the knowledge, and the encourage of those who had already claimed African consciousness. Abdias do Nascimento demonstrated to us that it was essential to have a cultural revolution before there could be a moral revolution. Indeed, in his writings Abdias was the Shaka and the Zumbi of the most important truths in the world.

Hotep to the Almighty whose name is sometimes Ptah, Ra, Atum, and Amen.

Hotep to the *orishas* Eshu, Obatala, Ogun, Ochosi, Shango, Yemanja, and Oshun.

Hotep to the great ancestors of Palmares!

Hotep, Abdias do Nascimento, eternal spirit of African resistance and victory!

Axé!