

The Meta-Narrative Origins of African and African American Studies at Arizona State University

by

Itibari M. Zulu, Th.D.

atjpas@gmail.com

Senior Editor, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*



The following is an interview with the Rev. Sakena Young-Scaggs (revsystah@gmail.com) and the Rev. Jonathan Scaggs of Tabernacle Christian Church in Goodyear, Arizona, held May 14, 2012 in Phoenix, Arizona conducted and transcribed by Itibari M. Zulu (senior editor, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*). The Rev. Sakena Young-Scaggs (revsys@asu.edu) is a Faculty Associate at Arizona State University in the School of Social Transformation, and the executive minister at Tabernacle Christian Church. Hence, a special thank you is extended to Arizona State University (Tempe, Arizona) head archivist Robert P. Spindler, curator Katherine Krzys, and library specialist Neil E. Millican for their assistance and cooperation.

IMZ: Thank you for this interview.

SYS: You are welcomed.

IMZ: My main reason for this interview is to get a narrative on the evolution of African American Studies at Arizona State University (ASU), namely because I am local, and second because this history for a department began at least three decades after the first big push for Black Studies in the U.S., circa 1968. Can you provide me with some insight into this history, my friend and colleague Floyd Alvin Galloway at the *Arizona Informant* newspaper said you are a good resource for uncovering this struggle?

SYS: At ASU we truly had cross-cultural collaboration between the Latinos and some of the liberal White students. And some of those leaders included, myself, Rossie Turman, Ashahed Triche (Muhammad), Alex Shivers, Joy Beason , (Sakena and Jonathan), Jeremy Levitt, Natalie Young, Don Clytus, Jackie Salawu (now Jackie Taylor), and Joanna (Salawu) DeShay to name a few. Joanna was a part of AKA [Alpha Phi Alpha] and she was part of the African dance troupe (I'll now give you the name of some of the key organizations). Jackie was the student director of a program of a student program called STARS, an abbreviation for Students Taking Action to Reach Success; it was the academic tutoring program. The Black Graduate Students Association with student then such as Trude Cooke-Turner. Alex was an active Sigma and a member of NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers) as was Rossie. Ashahed was a part of the ASU NAACP and Nation of Islam, very active and he later became an editor at *The Final Call* newspaper in Chicago for a while (Joy is married to Ashahed). The African Student Association was involved as well.

To explain, Rossie, I always say his name first (not because he is my brother and the best man at my wedding), but because he was a linchpin. We literally set ourselves up, we intentionally placed ourselves in different organizations that we could work with, and we worked to form a Black Coalition. Rossie was the brainchild, the 14 point plan was his brainchild, and everyone was collaborative on it, but it was his brainchild. So as you talk to others folks you will find other pieces of people who were involved, and people who say they were there, but weren't there. Maybe they would march with us, or they would come to one of the protests. For example, once we had a protest with all the other students, we were acting just fine, but Ashahed (then president of the NAACP) showed up with the NAACP and the Nation of Islam wearing all black and armbands, and our job, the rest of us was to act like we don't know nothing. So we were strategic in the way in which we placed ourselves.

IMZ: Yes, that is interesting, because it was organizational dynamics that set the tone and base of what you were doing; you just didn't come out of the air; you had an organizational structure.

SYS: Yes, at the time I was interning with Calvin Goode (Phoenix, Arizona city councilman, 1972-1994) and I was an active member at Tanner (Chapel) AME Church. So that had a lot to do with it as well. We had a community in what we would today call mentors or "Council or Jedi Warriors", people who were our community leaders. So we had Calvin Goode, Gene Blue, Leon Sullivan, and both Rossie and I interned with Leon Sullivan here in the 90's at the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH), we went to Africa with him through IFESH, now organizers of the African and African American Summit.

So there was a group of committed people, and the Black Woman's Taskforce was also very involved at the time, an activist women's group, as many do, faded away, as many groups did; but during that period they were very active and supportive, so we had people behind the scenes like Ann Hart, Marlene Wilson, and Gayle Randolph. And again the integral network at Tanner and First Institutional (Baptist Church) were involved.

IMZ: So there was a big community involvement?

SYS: Yes, Pastor Stewart (First Institutional Baptist Church) was our clarion and we were his campus clarion for the MLK holiday, so all that was going on simultaneously.

IMZ: And who was at Tanner?

SYS: Calvin Goode and also Jim Hill. Jim Hill was an administrator at ASU who was also acted behind the scenes for us; Jim Hill was also a member of Tanner. Bernard Jackson who was in charge of student services and academic support for students played a huge mentor role

We all went to Bernie Jackson's office, he had a Black Power fist on his desk, and after we entered we would not come out until another hour or half hour, every time, it was a training session whenever you went to see him. He would say, get in the car and he would drive us around the city, that was Bernie Jackson who has since passed at this point. So his legacy was that he founded Bethel AME Church now Greater Bethel AME Church; he was the first pastor there. Jonathan was his grad student, Jonathan was in academic support, across the hall from academic support was STARS department which housed minority and student counseling support, multicultural student counseling which was led by Debrah Brohard, she is important because she made things happen for us as did Bernie Jackson so we could do our work, meaning that scholarships would happen, and tutoring. Academics were another reason why we pulled together, because we saw our students academics dropping. Academics and retention, it was one thing to say we wanted a nice student organization, blah, blah, blah, but we also wanted to succeed. We wanted academic support; we wanted someone to help us with retention. And the chain, and on top of that chain was Art Carter, Dr. Art Carter was the dean of students. We would go in his office all the time and say we need this, and you need to find it, that was Art Carter. So those were the Black administrators who helped us to survive, and clearly there was a list of community people who would support us, we would call a meeting and those people would show up and ask for a meeting with Lattie Coor (the president of ASU), and if we couldn't get it, we would call the community people, and we would get the meeting.

Others in the era were Christine Wilkinson (she was in the administration), provost Jim Glick, Leonard Gordon, the dean of liberal arts. Now a linchpin for the administrators was a person Lavern Da'Costa who would give us support (make telephone calls for us, feed us etc.), and most importantly, she became the first administrative secretary for the new proposed Department. There was a Pan African group on campus, a study group and Niaamba Atibah was the leader. I was a part of the study group, and I also part of the student government, so the work was done collaboratively in how we used our resources.

Synergistically like all movements, we had the King Holiday as a central issue. So while we were involved in campus activism, the fight for the King Holiday was going on simultaneously. Hence the students and the community became another voice, just as you would have a voice of other organizations like SNCC, the NAACP and other organizations. So at the same time with the MLK holiday, the Arizona Black Community leaders were focused on that. For Example, my first summer at ASU was spent getting signatures on petitions to get Governor Evan Mecham out of office, because he had just got rid of the MLK Holiday. And that is why we called Pastor Stewart of First Institutional for campus support, because he was chair of the MLK Holiday campaign. .

For the MLK holiday, part of our commitment, we made as students, was to be the on campus arm, so we re-activated the ASU NAACP and Ashahed was the president. And yes, all this is leading to the Department.

IMZ: Yes, this information is good because it demonstrates a historical background, i.e., a continuation from the Civil Rights movement to the Black Power movement, and so on.

SYS: Yes, we set up Black study hours to realize academic success. We wanted to support our Black Student organizations, so we asked for money to go to National Black leadership conferences. They (the campus administration) found the money and gave it to us and provided faculty support as well.

IMZ: Approximately how many students were involved?

SYS: The core group was about twenty-five of which ten were active and probably another hundred or hundred and fifty who would gather upon notice. But we knew who we could depend on, and there was at least 50,000 students overall on campus that we had to reach out to and we were able to do that much with so few. And also again calling on our Latino brothers and sisters; we had friends in the LGBTQ community, the Black Law Students' association was terribly in support of us, and there is still one young lady from that organization still around the area.

So, going back to the top, one of the protests that were clearly a linchpin was the MLK holiday and what we wanted on campus was outlined in a fourteen point plan, written by Rossie. Our collective professors would also come and meet with us in the late night. They included Michael Mitchell who taught African American history, he was at Princeton when Dr. Cornell West was at Princeton (the first time). He is Cornell West's mentor. So we were able to invite Cornell West and Angela Davis to come to ASU, they came and did speeches, but they also came to work with us. Angela Davis complained about that, jokingly, "so you have me come to give a speech and you also want me to do this work." She was real. So they worked, and this was the year *Race Matters* (by Cornell West) came out. Support faculty were also Dr. Moses Moore who is in the Department of Religion, downtown in the City we had Gerald Richard, he now a State attorney, but back then he was the City attorney.

When I was doing my pre-law studies I would meet with him, he was my mentor. And I also worked with Calvin Goode, and Gerald would say, you are going to law school, and to this day, he says, you are going back. So when we would get in a bind we could call on Gerald. The way it worked in terms of the protest was in closing the administration or memorial Union and it shutting it down.

IMZ: Yes that seems to be a national pattern I am finding in my research.

SYS: And who worked in those buildings, it was Bernie Jackson, Debra Brohard, Art Carter?

IMZ: What year was that?

SYS: 1992, after the Clarence Thomas hearings. I remember because Mitchell had us watch them, every last one of them.

IMZ: The timing of this is interesting, the 70s and 80s were gone, yet in 1992 a protest happens, after the first major push for African American Studies. I guess students and the community had learned from all the different strategies of the past to move for change in a more rapid fashion, although not during the initial stage.

SYS: Yes, we were trained up by that group. And they would whisper in our ear and tell us what to do (so to speak), there was no doubt about that. And the meta-narrative was the MLK holiday, and we had the NFL Phoenix Cardinals at ASU in 1988, 1989, that was their first year, and played at the ASU stadium. So we had an NFL team on campus, hence Black football players and many Black Students worked at the games. We were the ushers, the ticket takers, so they were very supportive of that, and there was no MLK day, so the NFL ultimately said that they were not coming until there is a MLK holiday, so that was the meta-narrative. So when we took over the administration building/MU it was interesting. And my job was not to be there, to not get caught. So my job was not to get arrested, and help with the protests. So Jonathan can tell you more about what happened.

JS: The takeover was very short-lived, but it served its purpose. Because when you take over a building, the first thing they want to tell you is to get out. Then you say we are not leaving, then they say get out or else. And the response to get out or else was that they would come and get us. And at that point the university began to slow down; we had altered administrative people that this was going to happen. The community leaders knew this was going to happen as well.

SYS: And Al Phillips was there, he was the Black police officer on campus that watched out for us. He was also an artist.

JS: So all these things were in place, before the takeover. So when the takeover happened, it was an important show to get attention. The administration didn't really have our attention at the highest levels. They were the ones who would call the shot as to whether the police would storm the building. But we found a way to negotiate, and what ended up being negotiated out by them saying we would get a meeting with the President, soon. And soon was not soon enough, but they gave us a date. And they gave us a date and everything was fine, and it was all over, nobody was arrested or went to jail, there were no problems. But if someone had been arrested or someone was going to jail, we had attorneys and community leaders ready to show up. And that was the end of that until we had our first meeting with Lattie Coor, and it was student-lead, he wanted to know what we had to say, he also wanted to know of these kids have a plan or did they just pull something together half-cocked. And that is where the 14 point plan came from, we had, not only did we have a plan to discuss with him in the meeting, but we also had a plan with community leaders who were present in the room, so when Lattie walked in the room he recognized the community leaders and he knew every Black face in the room.

He had meet with, talked to them at one time or another in the community (but he didn't know they were coming), plus part of the Black faculty was there, Clovis Campbell, Sr. of the *Arizona Informant* newspaper was there, the president of the NAACP was there also, with others, and it was absolutely incredible, all kinds of people were there. It was unheard of, and never before had these people come together in this kind of way, except around the MLK holiday issue. We had Reverend Thomas of Tanner and Reverend Stewart of First institutional. So we meet on the 14 point plan which was a demand to be a part of a national Black student leader's conference on Black students at predominately white institutions of higher education, so they agreed to fund three years for attendance to the National Black Leadership Conference with ten students and two faculty members.

SYS: Part of our other demands was to support our student services programs and organizations. So they gave us \$5,000 and each student group would have a leader on this council, it was called the Black African Coalition, and Jeremy (Levitt) and Don Clytus were involved in this formation as well.

SYS: One of the important points in the 14 point demands was the Department, African American Studies, but the thing about that was that we wanted to hold the administration accountable for the entire 14 point plan. So they had a campus environment team, a group of folks they went to without asking us, and they created the position of Multi-cultural Affairs, we also had Umoja House which was a floor in the campus housing system, and we saw how that was important as we would spend time together as an affinity group, learning together (tutoring), and organizational training (learning how to make our Black organizations better).

JS: We were also looking out for our faculty in some ways. We made a request that new African American faculty not take on such a high service role so they could focus on academics, and not be overworked by being on every other board or committee. And that is still a problem because there is only half a dozen Black faculty and every other Black organization asks them to be on their board.

SYS: Yes, we had lost some key Black faculty. One key person was V.P. Franklin, the author of *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of African American Resistance*, he left early in the process. So we kept losing Black faculty. So we wanted a way to increase retention of Black faculty *and* students. Our Black students were not graduating at the rate they should have been, so the issue was around retention in how do we keep them. We can't keep Black faculty if they have to teach four classes, plus some wouldn't get tenure, and have no time personal to write, we know that in academy it is 'publish or perish'. Wanda Hendrix, a historian and mentor, was also at ASU at one time, but she eventually too left. And the late professor A. Wade Smith, he was very supportive of us. There is now a lecture series named for him at ASU. The core Political Science course, it should be noted, that made a difference for many of us Was Dr. Michael Mitchell's POS150 African American Politics. Many of us met in his course.

IMZ: Yes, I've read about him from an ASU web-site and from attending one of the memorial lecture series in 2007 featuring historian Darlene Clark Hine.

SYS: During this time I could not program my schedule around African American Studies, although many of us took a class with Moses Moore dealing with MLK and Malcolm X based on the book *Martin & Malcolm* by James H. Cone (creating our intellectual link to Civil Rights).

So the retention of Black faculty was important. But how do you gather the entire Black faculty from all the different Departments, into one place? You couldn't have a major in that. I could not major in African American Studies, so I took every Black class in every Department that was available to me that was taught by a Black faculty member on African American Studies, which was all there was, and that is all I could do. If they were to take a look at my transcripts and they would say, oh give her a degree in African American Studies.

IMZ: Is that what they did?

SYS: No. We still did not have a Department or Program.

IMZ: I was thinking maybe it was a special major.

SYS: In fact when it first started it was only a program, and normally a program doesn't have a major, so that was the case at ASU in the beginning. So they said we can have a certificate (taking baby steps, stages of growth) program in African American Studies, and someone said it will not become a full Department until somebody endows it, and get it some money (a line, FTE). So many of us responded that we have to graduate, and then get jobs, but some of us stayed. I went on to get another degree certificate (in Women's Studies), some worked on campus, and some went on to law school.

JS: And from there are a number of personal success stories. For example, after working with Lattie Coor for a year, Rossie Turman who thought he would go to ASU law, went on to Columbia law school, graduated at the top of his class, and he is now a partner in a law firm in New York. And there are others.

SYS: So now we have the three years, after the takeover and we continued to push, we attending the Black Student's leadership conferences, we were working with the NAACP, and we were engaged in the retention programs, we had speakers come and talk to us, and we had a speakers series. Then in 1992/1993 Rossie ran for student body president and he won, there had never been a Black student body president before, but we had support from leaders in the community who taught us how to run a full coalition-based campaign which made it possible for him/us to win. This was tremendous for us, and of course Calvin Goode and Jim Hill (our grassroots trainers) were very helpful. And at the time, I believe, Jim Hill was director of off campus services at ASU, and by that time we all were living off campus.

In the administration of Rossie at ASASU we all got good posts. I ran the leadership and lecture series programming and my budget was now \$50,000 for the entire campus instead of the little \$5,000 that was given to us before as a coalition. We had a good coalition; I even brought the Maureen McCormick, Marcia Brady from the 'Brady Bunch' television show.

We were running the entire student government, for all students. We put in a new computer system, we put art in the building, and we had an office for the Black/African student coalition in the basement of the Memorial Union. Then, as these things go, we had a coalition glitch in the overall four ethnic coalitions when in 1992 a group of White gay males said they are a minority and thus they wanted a space in the coalition offices in the student union building we managed. But the multi-ethnic LGBT came together and said no, so instead of a white gay male group, a LGBT coalition was formed indicating they are a minority, but not a racial minority.

IMZ: In that and other controversies, what was the response from the student newspaper?

JS: During this time, *The State Press*, the ASU student newspaper was a tool, so we had some meetings with them and negotiated for editorial space which meant it had to be in the form of a letter to the editor, but any and every letter we wrote to the editor got published.

And frequently that would begin the dialogue and some of their staff writers would write an editorial response, creating some weight, enthusiasm, and conversation. So this would open things up for more meetings so folks could understand our point of view and perhaps conclude that we were not such bad people.

IMZ: Yes, that is interesting. And the community support was also somewhat unique, which I am sure help diminished some of the opposition.

JS: Yes, and honestly, once that element was ‘put on the table’, everything changed, and we were taken seriously. Once we invited the community to the meetings, they kept coming (it was a big deal at the time, we could call at any time). And plus at the time, our average age was 25, we were not kids.

SYS: Put it this way, each one of us had our own Civil Rights DNA. Rossie’s family was here in Arizona, Jonathan’s family (reverend doctor, reverend doctor parents) is from here, I am from (Brick city) Newark, New Jersey and my mother worked in politics and was an activist, so there is an ethic of activism, care and community activism (holding people’s feet to the fire). So things did not happen in a vacuum.

JS: The unfortunate thing about that era (Lattie Coor) is that those of us who were active at the time wanted to coach the next group, but they were not there to coach, and those who were didn’t understand the volatility of what we had started, they did not understand the pressure we had to bare, and were not ready to carry that mantel forward. And maybe had they been older, 25 or 26 like we were, maybe they could have engaged more so that all the work would not be lost.

And although we kind of lingered around (after our graduations) to see if the Department would happen, the momentum was hard to sustain. Life had to move on, and it was the first year of a Black Graduation ceremony in 1994.

SYS: And the community leader that links to the Black Graduation and African dance is Fatimah Halim. She runs a Rites of Passage program here in Arizona and an empowerment program for women named Blueprint for Womanhood a Today the Black African Coalition graduation is in its 18th year, so that is an accomplishment. And it is still run by the Black student coalition of organizations.

Now the Department you see now is not necessarily what we envisioned. We envisioned a Department formed by pulling people together from different Departments to form a Department. African and African American Studies Department (AAAS) as a stand-alone department, Black Faculty from across the campus are still isolated and not connected in an intentional way. It has sustained the spirit of the vision as a diasporic project. Bringing together issues and concerns across the diaspora in the academy.

JS: They would all be jointly appointed, but their offices would be in the same location. But that is not what has happened, so there is no central place for Black students to see Black faculty. But this is the reality of higher education.

SYS: And faculty like Matthew Whitaker is certainly the living benefactor of our work. He has a Center and I would have never thought that would ever happen, but it has. In 1996 the Department went to the to the Arizona Board of Regents and it was approved in 1998, and after that Arna Bontemps (the current faculty chair of African and African American Studies at ASU) can tell you what happened from that time on. I left to do non-profit work and go to grad school.

IMZ: Thank you. I sincerely appreciate your willing to sit down and remember this unique history of the origins of African and African American Studies at Arizona State University.

SYS: You are most welcomed.

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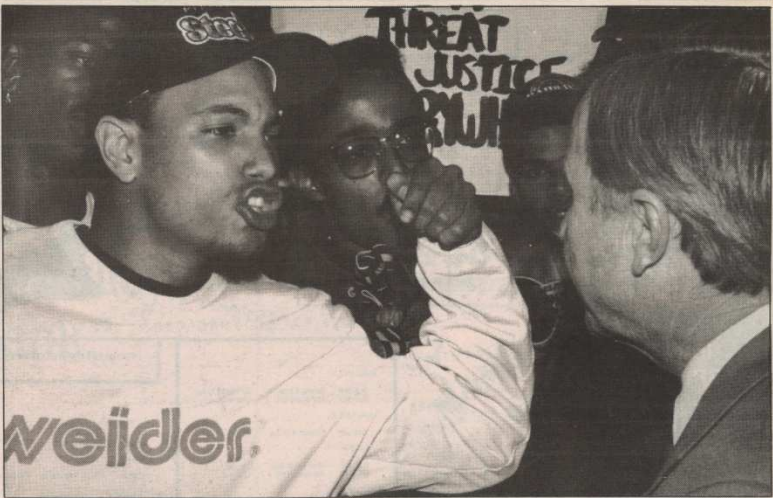
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THE DEMAND

On Friday, 20 black students wearing ski masks formed the third floor of the MU demonstrating against the lack of University response to diminishing black faculty. More than 50 other black students protested outside the building. African-American Coalition Vice Chair Natalie Young referred to Monday's MLK observances saying, "We couldn't think of a better time to show our frustrations."


PHOTO ESSAY
BY SEAN OPENSHAW



(Above) Jeremy Levitt, a 21-year-old political science major, challenges ASU President Lattie Coor to a meeting. Coor accepted the challenge and met with Levitt and other members of the African-American Coalition Tuesday to discuss vanishing black faculty at ASU.



(Left) Cpl. Allen Clark handcuffs one of the five students arrested on the third floor of the MU Friday.



(Right) Joy Beason, Tracey Warfield and Sherri Moore (left to right) lead the demonstration back from the ASU Police Station where they met the five arrested students.

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