

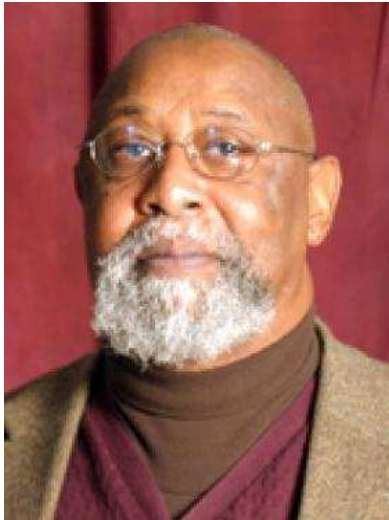
Discipline Born of Struggle: African American and African Studies at Ohio State University

by

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The following interview of H. Ike Okafor-Newsum (H.E. Newsum), chair of the Department of African American and African Studies at The Ohio State University (OSU) was conducted (August 16, 2012) and transcribed by *JPAS* senior editor Itibari M. Zulu.



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IMZ: Thank you Dr. H. Ike Okafor-Newsum (H.E. Newsum) for this interview.

HION: You are welcome.

IMZ: From reading your department's website I see that some great things have happened at Ohio State University in regards to African American and African Studies (AAAS) or as it was originally established in October 1969, Black Studies. The program has grown from achieving formal department status in 1972 to becoming one of the strongest African American and African Studies programs in the nation with a comprehensive multidisciplinary BA and MA program; a PhD program in development; study abroad programs to South Africa, Tanzania and Ghana; a Community Extension Center that serves as an outreach arm into the Black community in the city of Columbus (which I had the opportunity to visit); and two academic journals, *Research in African Literatures* and *Spectrum: a Journal About Black Men*. Your department now has 21 full-time faculty members. How did all that happen?

HION: Yes, we have made great progress throughout the years. As you may know, we are launching a PhD program, and we are waiting for the final approval by the Ohio Board of Regents. There are fourteen Africana Studies units offering the PhD and of the fourteen only eight have been in existence long enough to have graduated a cohort.

Returning to your question, yes we started our BA program in 1969 and our MA program in 1972. Also in 1972, we opened our Community Extension Center. So you can almost say from the point we began, we have had a free standing facility in the community for outreach and engagement with African people in the state of Ohio.

The way all this came about is historical. Before 1969 there were of course African descended people at Ohio State, and this was not the most welcoming campus for Black students, which was also true at most of the predominately white institutions who may have admitted Black students, but they were not as comfortable on those campuses as they should have been. But that was the reality, and for a long time, OSU would ride off the reputation of Jesse Owens. He attended Ohio State and was a great Olympian of the 1930s. Owens was often used as evidence that Ohio State admitted African Americans early in its history. And I understand that even before the 1930s OSU admitted African Americans, but they could not live on campus. In fact one of the landmarks in Columbus is a house that Jesse Owens lived in while he was a student at Ohio State. He could not live in a residence hall on campus, and this was true for other Blacks for a long time. Even later in the 50s and 60s, when African American students were permitted to live on campus, they were not welcome. And even now, we have hate crimes directed at African Americans, Africans and other students of color on this campus, even as recent as last Spring.

IMZ: Wow, I didn't know that.

HION: Yes, we had several hate crime alerts. In fact, we initiated the Hate Crime Alert last spring because of what was going on at Ohio State. A group of students of various backgrounds (not just Africans) came together to do a quiet vigil for Trayvon Martin and Shaima Alawadi, an Iraqi woman killed in California, she was beaten to death and it is believed to be a hate crime, but some right-wingers are saying no, her family killed her. But anyway, they got together to pay respects to the young lady and Trayvon Martin, and their families.

They were met by a group of white students who had been leading a campaign to carry concealed weapons on campus. Yes we have students at Ohio State who want to be able to carry weapons on the school's grounds. They are saying they should be able to respond to situations like what happened at Virginia Tech. They want to be able to defend themselves in case something happens on campus that may endanger them. That is what they want us to believe. Anyway, the students of color conducted the quiet vigil for Trayvon Martin and Shaima Alawadi and they were met by white students wearing empty (gun) holsters. When they flashed the holsters so that the students of color could see them, it was not clear to anyone that these were empty holsters.

IMZ: Oh.

HION: In fact, they brandished the holsters because they wanted the students attending the vigil to believe that they were carrying weapons. And it was only when one of the white students was arrested that the students of color found out that the holsters were empty. And that is just one of the hate crimes that took place last Spring, there were several, but I share this one with you to illustrate the situation at OSU.

Anyway, at the point of the 1960s when Black Studies came to Ohio State, it was the result of student, community people, faculty and staff demands. Among the leaders was Dr. Charles Ross who was the first head of Black Studies at Ohio State when it was a program. He was followed by Dr. William (Nick) E. Nelson, Jr who became the first department chair. But it was because of people like Charles Ross, Nick Nelson, Frank W. Hale, Jr. and vice Provost William Hollingsworth, who supported and advocated for Black people on the OSU campus that we were able to accomplish so much. These were the four who were at the forefront in terms of insiders, they were members of the faculty and they were administrators who were pushing for Black Studies, pushing for an Office of Minority Affairs, pushing for a Black cultural center along with students and people in the community who supported them.

So Ohio State did not decide out of the goodness of their heart that it was going to have Black Studies.

IMZ: Right.

HION: It was forced into Black Studies, and everything Black students and faculty have gotten at Ohio State has been the result of struggle.

IMZ: When did you first arrive at Ohio State University, and when did the full demand for Black Studies begin, and why?

HION: I arrive at Ohio State University in the late 1980s, 1988 to be exact. Dr. Manning Marable was chair, he came to OSU in 1987 and he knew me from way back. We were both in grad school at the same time, at different schools, but at the same time, both going to the African Heritage Studies Association conferences and other meetings of Black intellectuals. And I am glad to say, and I am very grateful to say Manning thought of me and asked me to serve as the director of what was then the Department of Black Studies Community Extension Center. So I was associate professor and director of the center when I arrived in 1988. So I wasn't here when the demands for Black Studies originally started.

IMZ: Okay.

IMZ: In what ways are you able to enlist the aid and support of people to build the department at Ohio State University?

HION: Well, we have had the support of insiders, that is, people at Ohio State who are members of the faculty, members of the administration and staff, both Black and white. But we certainly enjoyed and had the solid support of this local community.

IMZ: Good.

HION: Number one, the community embraced William Hollingsworth and Frank W. Hale Jr. They embraced William E. Nelson, Jr. and Charles Ross, and it was because these men were standup guys that had a presence in the community. They were involved in issues that affected Black people on and off campus. Because they had connections in the community, community people would side with students, faculty and staff on the Ohio State campus and together demanded for much of what we have today. We have also been able to find allies among white administrators, faculty, staff and students. But again, we have also gotten tremendous support from the local community. So that is how we built support mechanisms for Black people at OSU. Other academic units have been willing to work with us. So there are some academic units we work closely with, like History, English, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Geography, Comparative Studies and others all around campus.

IMZ: How did you create a way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen?

HION: Well one of the things that we did was that we were thoughtful about things from the beginning. For example, as I mentioned before, we knew we wanted a presence in the community, a structure in the inner city that would represent the department on campus. So that was one of the first things we did, and the other thing we did was to understand the importance of African languages in the development of the discipline. So we started teaching KiSwahili at Ohio State almost immediately when we started Black Studies.

IMZ: Yes.

HION: So that gave opportunity to East Africans who were studying here to teach and go to school and broaden the Swahili speaking community in Columbus, and we even introduced KiSwahili to the public schools.

IMZ: Wow that is good.

HION: We had KiSwahili at a middle and high school, and for a time, the 1990s into the 2000s, there was a demand on the part of parents for Swahili. So we introduced KiSwahili to the schools by first offering it to the community, by teaching the parents, and they would teach their children, and then KiSwahili classes migrated into the public school curriculum.

IMZ: That is very interesting.

HION: Yes, the language program through the Community Extension Center has created opportunities for some people to do some extraordinary things. You can imagine what students as well as faculty were able to do because we have the Community Extension Center. For example, even now the Geography department uses the center for a mapping project in the Black community, and the Black community benefits from the mapping project because the maps that are created by the students tell people where things are. For examples, it can tell you where to get fresh vegetables, and it also tells you the location of the nearest bank, pharmacy, barber shops, and beauty shops. It can also provide a map of the various destinations people travel to in their daily life. Also the English department collects literacy narratives in the African community through our Community Extension Center. So you can see through those two examples we are providing faculty and graduate students the opportunity to interface with the community and in doing so we provide the opportunity to give something back. Certainly you can see how the mapping project does that, but the literacy project also preserves the community's history. And this Black community in Columbus is very history conscious. There are local lay historians who are collecting information all the time that can take you back into the history of the 1920s, the 1930s or the 1940s.

They are lay people who are history buffs and the Community Extension Center is a place where they meet. We actually have community based history courses (not University credit courses) that are tied to the enthusiasm around local history in the community.

IMZ: Yes, that is interesting. In general, how would you compare the events at Ohio State with events at other Black Studies units around the nation? I ask this because even with good resources and faculty, as in the case of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, its original structure (degree program and reporting responsibilities) has recently been dismantled to establish a doctoral program against the wishes of students, members of the faculty, friends, and alumni.

HION: Even when we were writing our PhD proposal we had to make those types of comparisons with places like Harvard, Yale and Northwestern. We have compared ourselves to them because we consider them the top three, and we usually compare ourselves to the University of Massachusetts, and six others (Indiana, UC Berkeley, Michigan State, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Temple, and Cornell, etc.). But we believe that we have something that no other institution has and that's a free-standing Community Extension Center, and I think that makes us unique. As I look at the other programs I see people specializing in African American or African Diaspora Studies, but they don't offer the range we do: African American, African and African Diaspora. We have a three tier configuration providing our graduate students an opportunity to specialize in one area or a combination of the three at the MA level and very soon at the PhD level. Our undergraduate program is organized around conceptual/cognate areas: Representation & Performance; Social Issues, Community Development, & Public Service; Histories, Cultures, Languages, & Literatures; and Race, Ethnicity, Gender, & Sexuality. These cognate areas are also relevant at the graduate level as well. Because we believe the market hires people with expertise in African American, African or African Diaspora Studies, we have those three tracks in our graduate program.

So I would say that some of the other units offer one or two of these tracks, but not all three. So that makes us unique. And in regards to journals, I don't know of any Africana Studies units that have two international journals. Our older journal, *Research in African Literatures* is forty years old, and it is the leading journal in African literature. *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* is very new; the inaugural issue will come out this fall. *Spectrum* is also an international journal and we intentionally used the terminology Black men to be totally inclusive. We didn't want to say African American men; we didn't want to say African. We wanted to say Black men because it is an international journal. The articles you will see in *Spectrum* will come from all over the world and will address the issues of Black men and Black communities all over the world.

IMZ: Yes, there are a few journals dealing with Black men, one is titled *The Journal of Black Masculinity*, an international print publication.

HION: They are also available on line. We consider them a partner in this endeavor, not a competitor. Both *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* and *Research in African Literatures* are online and in print publications.

IMZ: I understand that your department like many others was originally named Black Studies but they have decided to use other names to describe themselves. What is your opinion of this shift?

HION: First let me say, there are still diehards in the department, and I will admit that I am one of them, who still embrace the term Black Studies. I believe it is more representative of the global Black community. Even when you say African and African American, one might assume you don't include the Caribbean, Africans in Europe, Southeast Asia or Latin America. So I believe that the current name limits us. But we are a democratically governed department and I think it was around 1996 when there were discussions about the name. Some believed that Black did not reflect the cultural heritage of Africana peoples properly. We are an African people and it was reasoned that the word African needed to be in the name of the department. We are almost configured 50/50 Africans and African Americans and we now have one West Indian Brit among us. So I guess you can say that we tried to accommodate both of the two dominant constituencies in the department. I recall that the vote was close. It was only about twenty-two of us, so it didn't take much to win the vote, as we were split between those, like me, who wanted Black Studies, and others who wanted Black World Studies or African World Studies, and still others who wanted African and African American Studies, or Africana Studies. Because we had all these particular groups it only took about six votes to win. So the group who wanted African American and African Studies had the largest number of votes and that is how we became what we are today. Although some of us didn't like the outcome, it was a fair process as we all sat in the same room (looking at each other) and cast our votes.

IMZ: In a related issue between African Studies and African American Studies, in many cases they have different agendas, and often there is little or no communication between the two, a process I saw unfold at UCLA. How did this clash of agenda (national, international) work itself out at Ohio State University?

HION: What we do here is combine the two. The African Studies curriculum is in this department, as is African Diaspora Studies and African American Studies. One can't specialize in African Studies, unless they come to us. Now there is a Center for African Studies (CAS) here that historically speaking has always been headed by a member of this department (except for maybe six months, when a non-Black Studies person was the head). The present Director Dr. Robert Agunga, is a faculty affiliate in African American and African Studies and his tenure home is in the School of Agriculture. The difference between the Center and the Department is that the Center provides a forum for Africanists anywhere in the University, whereas the Department is the academic degree granting unit; students can't pursue a degree through the Center for African Studies; nor can a faculty member be tenured in a center.

The Center for African Studies is a close partner with the Department of African American and African Studies, especially in the area of African Languages. When the Center receives Title VI funds for new languages, the Department is responsible for the instructional component. We offer the African language classes including a minor in Somali and a minor in KiSwahili..

IMZ: In regards to your leadership as the department chair, how would you classify yourself (for example, aggressive, laid-back, or authoritarian)?

HION: I am told that I am laid-back, and I think I am task oriented, but some of the ways that things get done around here are also tied to the fact that I have strong relationships with some of the faculty. It is not even, I don't have the same type of relationship with all members of the faculty, because they are all different. My relationship with some faculty is stronger than with others. So I would say that being task oriented would be first. We move things along based on a commitment to the task.

I think when you are relationship oriented, that is a little risky, because if the relationship goes sour, then nothing gets done. So we all have to be committed to the work. Itibari, I think the difficult thing is what to do with junior faculty, what I mean by that is because they are probationary faculty and they are working towards tenure, we can't ask much of them in terms of service. They have to be more committed to their teaching; they have to buckle down in terms of their research and publications in order to get tenure and stay here. We struggle around having associate and full professors who will commit themselves to the work of the department, and there is always work to be done, and the chair can't do it all. We are governed by the majority, and the majority carries out the work of the department by committee. Committees are always chaired by a senior member, a full or associate professor, and all committees have representation from the junior faculty, and we try to make sure there is a balanced gender representation which is not easy, because the men still outnumber the women in the department. Right now, we have about eight women in the department, but still most of them are junior faculty, most are assistant professors. But again, that is a struggle. It is always a struggle running a department when almost half of your faculty is probationary, so you can't really ask them to do very much. But we seem to get it done. Some of our junior faculty members want to serve the Department. They have good ideas. I have to make sure that they are not overly committed.

IMZ: Yes, I understand.

HION: Also, in terms of the Community Extension Center we have a great Director in Dr. Judson Jeffries, and he has three program coordinators. They often have one or two graduate students working there and they also have a volunteer program. Some community members have been serving as volunteers since I was Director of the Center back in the late 1980s. So we manage to get things done. We also try to have faculty members involved in the center. By try, I mean sometimes they have interesting ideas and they want to try those ideas at the center. But sometimes it is difficult, because I am not sure if the University has a full appreciation about what we do at the center.

They are accustomed to having centers that are more research oriented; we do research at our Extension Center, but that is not the mission of the center; that is not why we created it. As you know, because you are in the Black Studies profession, community service is a pillar of the discipline. The most important role of any Africana Studies department is to always figure out ways to transfer the university's resources, human and otherwise, to the local community and this is especially true at a Land Grant institution like Ohio State.

IMZ: Yes.

HION: When the discipline was founded, it was agreed that community service would be a pillar. People in this field believe that if you were not doing that, you were not doing the important work of the discipline. And the University is not fully in tune with that way of thinking; they are used to thinking of centers in terms of research, and when faculty members want to do certain things at the Center they want to know that their service is going to be recognized, they want to be rewarded. Not that everybody wants to be paid for their service, but they do want a little pat on the back from this University. So sometimes that gets in the way. The fact that people don't see service as valued like they see research discourages some faculty members from doing more in the community. They may say, "I am not going to waste my time doing community outreach and engagement when I need to be trying to publish" or that "I am not going to get a raise," "I am not going to get recognition." So there is a struggle around service in an academic culture that does not truly value community service.

IMZ: Yes, a person would have to decide on how to spend his or her time, and on what direction they would like to take.

HION: Yes, so we are not going to find many assistant professors spending time at the center because they are trying to get tenure. There is one assistant professor who has strongly supportive readers' reports from her publisher who seems to be hungry to get into our Extension Center. She has already proposed several projects.

IMZ: There is an emphasis in the discipline on a scholar-activist model, a paradigm of the Department of Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati directed by Terry Kershaw that will include a PhD program.

HION: Yes, Terry is a MA graduate of our department. And he came through a program that has an Extension Center, so we can't be surprised that Dr. Kershaw would place emphasis on activist scholarship. And we say our PhD program will have a strong community development aspect to it.

IMZ: Many programs are purely academic in their approach and have lost the intent of the original mission of the discipline, especially the scholar-activist perspective.

HION: Yes, and you know it is a Catch 22, it is what we have just talked about. The University doesn't value community service. Every University talks about outreach and engagement, but when you challenge them, it is different. We challenged Ohio State with the establishment of our Community Extension Center and at the time they pushed back. The current administration is an improvement in comparison to some in the past, but when the rubber hits the road, the idea of community service is more attractive than the practice. Research, publication and the acquisition of grants remain more important.

IMZ: Yes, they want to know how many publications a person has and what other purely academic exercises were completed within a particular time frame.

HION: I think the closest thing they get to valuing community service is in how they value service to agriculture and health care and these are very important. You know all these big State schools have big agriculture programs, and they consider that community service. I would like to see more community service on the part of universities in inner city communities.

We have said so much about community service that I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that from the very beginning Black Studies placed equal value and equal importance on community service and on the production and dissemination of knowledge in the African world. I certainly don't want to give your readers the impression that there is an anti-intellectual bias in our discipline. Black/Africana Studies tends toward the merging of scholarship and community activism as you pointed out earlier.

IMZ: Right.

IMZ: Has your department offered or is it working on developing any online courses within the curriculum?

HION: Yes, we are working on that. We have been talking about doing online language instruction for a long time. Now the College of Arts and Sciences is on that wave, and it is not that the other foreign language units in the University are doing much online instruction, they are not. No one at Ohio State has really jumped out there yet with online instruction, but that is what the University is pushing. We plan to be online with our Somali and Swahili language and culture programs. Now the resistance I see is a little academic elitism that you find in the general University community, but also in this department. Faculty are seeing new for profit Universities operating exclusively online and they see the online curriculum enterprise as bootleggers and they don't want Ohio State or the Department of African American and African Studies to be associated with that kind of thing.

People like me will say yes, we need to be cautious, but at the same time, we cannot stand on the sideline, this is the 21st century, and almost everything is online. So we must put our curriculum online as much as seems reasonable and we must uphold high standards and the integrity of the Department.

IMZ: Definitely.

HION: So I am all for it, but I am not sure how far we would go right now, because for now it is all about Languages.

IMZ: Yes, perhaps something like a certificate program.

HION: Yes, that sounds good because we have been talking about doing a teacher training institute so we could start moving this State towards teacher certification in Black Studies. So yes, one way to achieve that is by doing some of it online.

IMZ: In regards to texts for African American and African Studies at Ohio State University and elsewhere, what set of texts do you think are essential for teaching?

HION: We don't agree on any particular text in this department. But what we have been talking about for years is creating our own. The Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State and the Department of History publish introductory textbooks (Introduction to Women's Studies, Introduction to American History), and they have become revenue producing ventures for them. So their model is tempting, because we also need more streams of revenue in this department. Eventually, we are going to have to come to grips with adoption of an Africana Studies textbook and one way to do that is by developing our own.

IMZ: Many use Maulana Karenga's *Introduction to Black Studies*.

HION: Yes, many of us have used his text; we have also used *A Turbulent Voyage* by Floyd Hayes, *Crossing the Danger Waters*, and the text by Darlene Clark Hine. So it's been a mixed bag in this department. We have not adopted any one text, because again, we don't agree on any one of them. Karenga's text was heavily used in the 1990s, and at one point I was using Abdul Alkalimat's *Introduction to Afro-American Studies* and that was because I am from his group. I am a founding member of People's College.

IMZ: How do you envision the future of African Studies/Black Studies in the academy?

HION: I see a bright future, and one of the pieces of evidence I would use to support the notion that Africana Studies has a bright future is the fact that so many PhD programs are being launched.

IMZ: Yes, considering the current political-economic climate in the U.S.

HION: There are thirteen PhD programs of which six are brand new, initiated between 2009 and now, so given this trend, how can one say there is no future in this field when you have PhD programs being launched all across the country?

IMZ: Yes, especially after at least forty years of demonstrating its worth in the academy.

HION: Yes, and given that history, people should not be surprised. The development of PhD programs in the field has been a long time coming.

IMZ: Indeed, and although each campus has a different struggle, there is a national momentum to implement PhD programs in the discipline.

HION: Itibari, what surprises me is that this department (and I am criticizing myself) didn't have a PhD program fifteen years ago. We should have been doing this around the time Temple launched their program in 1987.

IMZ: Yes, especially with twenty-two faculty members.

HION: Relatively speaking we have always been a large department, although we have fluctuated between twenty-two and fourteen and probably never got below fourteen or fifteen fulltime tenure track, not counting the lecturers.

IMZ: For the next generation of folks in the discipline, what advice would you give them if they decide to head a department in the future?

HION: First, I think a good department head has to be well rounded. You can't just be one thing. And I may be a little bias. I don't know if you know anything about my history, but I taught at the University of Ife in Nigeria for years, so I am one of those people who has had one foot in the States and the other foot on the continent.

IMZ: Okay.

HION: So the kind of stuff we hear about in Africana Studies, about tensions between Africans and African Americans, those kinds of tensions are minimized when the leader is sensitive to the Diaspora, the continent and to the African American component of the department. So one has to almost be all things to all people (African, African American, African Diaspora), and if you are not, I think that can be a problem. And I have seen that in this department when we had leadership that was not sufficiently balanced in that way. Manning was balanced in that way, and so were a few others that have chaired this department and I include myself in this group. Also, we have had a lot of Americanists and Africanists in the department, but in short, we have had just a few personalities that have caused conflict. In fact, I have always argued that there has never been a conflict between African Americans and Africans, but rather there has been conflict between individual personalities.

IMZ: Yes, I agree.

HION: You get two big egos in a disagreement and there you have a problem. One time we had two individuals (and we still have some big egos), one from the continent, and the other from here, and they clashed. There are always examples of tension between colleagues in academe. Most of the time such conflict is not between Africans and African Americans. I have seen at Ohio State two African American colleagues or two Africans go at it and this is more common.

In terms of leadership style I think our African colleagues are uncomfortable with the oppositional and confrontational relationship that has characterized African Americans' approach to dealing with the university administration and African Americans have been concerned about what they perceive as the accommodationist approach of African academic leaders in their dealings with campus administrators. Africans in the academy are not seen as sensitive to the African American community. These are matters that need our attention. What should be most desirable is a unified African-African American effort in all endeavors.

IMZ: Yes.

HION: So I believe the good leader will be able to figure that out. And also, I believe the good leader has to figure out the administration, and they have to do it in a way that doesn't bring shame to the office. This means that you can't engage the administration and be a brown nose. You have to be able to stand firm in a principled way.

IMZ: As we end, I thank you for this interview,

HION: I am glad that I can do this.

IMZ: Yes, I appreciate your participation because each campus has a story they can share, the lived experiences that can be shared, especially when many are reluctant to participate because they feel their challenges are a reflection of their personality rather than a reflection of the institutions being examined. The aim is to pass on the knowledge so we can all have an idea of what happened in the recent past concerning the development of the discipline.

HION: And before we end, let me say that I may not have done a good job of telling the Ohio State story, because I didn't say enough about the sacrifice of students in the struggle on this campus in the late sixties and early seventies, some of whom were brought up on federal charges and expelled from the University. They were later vindicated and allowed to come back and finish their education. Theirs is also an important part of the story at Ohio State University and they should be appreciated and remembered.