

In Memoriam: Yemi Touré



Yemi Touré (1948-2013) began his earthly journey as Ronald Leroy Finney in Orangeburg, South Carolina on February 14, 1948 to Hilda (Grayson) Finney, a beloved educator well known in the Los Angeles community and Dr. Earnest Finney Sr., Dean of Education at Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. He was the youngest son of Earnest and Hilda Finney and brother to Robert (Bobby), Earl, and Earnest Finney, Jr. Ronald spent his early years in the small coastal town of Conway, South Carolina and was a quintessential county boy. He grew up in the segregated south and attended grade school in a small classroom huddled around a potbelly stove to keep warm in the winter. Around the age of twelve, Ronald moved to Los Angeles, California to live with his mother Hilda Finney. Ronald graduated from Dorsey High School in Los Angeles where he was a smart, popular and outgoing student.

Yemi loved the written word. It was a passion rooted in his mother's love of books and he would eventually inherit her expansive library and continue to build upon it over the next 40 years. His library became a significant link not only to his ancestry, but it reflected his deep love for Afrikan people, our liberation, and our story.

Yemi also loved the blues. In particular, blues legends like Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, Etta James and especially John Lee Hooker. Growing up in Conway, South Carolina he and the neighborhood children would sneak away from home in the evenings and go play in front of the juke joints. Too young to go in, they would listen by the door to the blues and R&B playing on the juke box and watched grown folks having a good time dancing and singing the blues. In a tribute dedicated to John Lee Hooker Yemi wrote, “the blues is not about wallowing in pity or "Oh, poor me". The blues is a channel to express that pain, and to thereby survive and triumph for one more day. It is an outlet, a release, a way that we stayed sane in a truly insane world.”

In 1970 Yemi earned his Bachelor’s degree in Journalism from California State University at Los Angeles and a Master’s degree in Journalism from UCLA in 1972. During his college years, his passion and interest in media and journalism emerged as he completed his thesis on “Black Press and Media”. During his undergraduate work, he traveled to Lagos and Ile Ife, Nigeria where he was given the name Oyeyemi Touré by the people of the village in which he lived. After UCLA, he spent several years as a freelance writer and journalist, and created the *Talking Drum* newsletter. In 1974, Yemi married Yolanda Thompson and had two wonderful children, Kimanthi Touré and Husan Thompson.

As a result of his work as a writer and journalist in the Black media, Yemi became active in the Black Power Movement and the Pan African People’s Organization in San Francisco, California. He was contacted by Jimmy Garrett, a pioneer in the Black Student Union movement and then Director of the Black Studies Center at Claremont College. Hence, in the tradition of his parents, Yemi also answered the call to teach and accepted Professor Garrett’s invitation to teach in the Black Studies Center at the Claremont Colleges in Claremont, California.

The San Francisco Pan African People’s Organization (formerly known as the Afro-American Institute) was organized by Oba T’Shaka and members of the San Francisco chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1966, and thus, gave birth to the Pan African Secretariat. In 1976, Yemi started the Los Angeles chapter of the Pan African Secretariat. One of the primary benchmarks of the Los Angeles Pan African Secretariat was the State of the Race Conferences, the first of which was held in 1977. The State of the Race conferences brought together Black Nationalists and Pan-Africanists in history, education, arts, and black politics, with such giants as John Henrik Clarke, Haki R. Madhubuti, Yosef A.A. ben-Jochannan, Elizabeth Sibeko, Queen Mother Moore, Louis Farrakhan Muhammad Sr, and Frances Cress Welsing.

As part of his activism against apartheid in South Africa, Yemi also participated in the Free South Africa movement and led an initiative to collect 100,000 student signatures against apartheid in South Africa which was later submitted to the United Nations. He continued his work with the free South Africa movement through the 1980’s until the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990.

Yemi started his career as a Copy Editor at the *Los Angeles Times* in 1979 and in that same year he married Itithari Burrell and they had three beautiful children, Nehanda, Garvey, and Malcolm Touré '. Yemi also loved family and was incredibly proud to not only being a father, but a mentor to numerous young men in the community, both in Los Angeles and Atlanta.

Above all, his five children were his most treasured and precious gifts. In 1993, the Touré family relocated to Atlanta, Georgia and Yemi continued his career as a Copy Editor with the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* until his retirement in 2008, culminating his 40 year career in professional Journalism. Yemi was serious about institution-building as an act of self-determination. As an extension of his work in the movement and in media, he created the Center for Blacks in the Media, HYPE Information News Service, and he launched the Black Man Film Festival 2002 in the city of Atlanta, Georgia, on the campus of Clark Atlanta University. The idea for the festival came to Yemi Touré , after he saw the film “*Baby Boy*,” directed by John Singleton. “*Baby Boy*” explores fathers and sons, husbands and wives, men in competition with each other -- and what it means to be a man. Inspired by the film, Yemi wanted a place where these ideas could be explored in depth and on a regular basis. Thus, the International Black Man Film Festival was born, and the Festival has been held every year since 2002, and in 2011, it was simulcast in Accra, Ghana West Africa, becoming truly international.