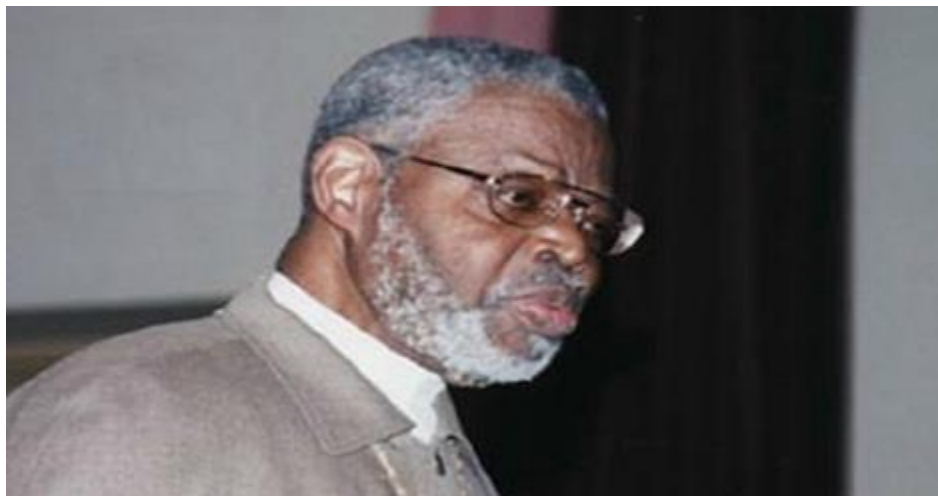


‘Doctor Ben,’ Legendary Scholar of Egypt: Dean of the Harlem Street University

by

Todd Steven Burroughs, Ph.D.
toddpanther@gmail.com

Todd Steven Burroughs is an independent researcher and writer based in Hyattsville, MD and the author of *Son-Shine on Cracked Sidewalks*, an audiobook on Amiri Baraka and Ras Baraka through the eyes of the 2014 Newark, NJ mayoral campaign. He is also the co-editor with Jared Ball of *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable’s Malcolm X* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 2012) and the co-author, with Herb Boyd, of *Civil Rights: Yesterday & Today* (Lincolnwood, IL: West Side Publishing, 2010).



Yosef Alfredo Antonio ben-Jochannan, known to the African world as “Dr. Ben,” believed that education belonged to any member of his race who wanted it.

Perhaps that was because of the 20th century tradition of ad-hoc “street universities,” with step-ladder orators as varied as Malcolm X and “Porkchop” Edward Davis, a tradition he understood. Perhaps it was because of the racism he experienced as a young Black man studying engineering.

B-1

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Or perhaps it was because he believed that if his people knew their collective root, their ancient greatness, they would fight for their freedom and achieve it.

“Dr. Ben,” one of the founding scholars and lecturers in what is now known as Africana Studies, died after a long illness. He was 96.

Active for at least 50 years, his death represents another milestone in the slow passing of politically-and-culturally Black, pre-gentrified Harlem, a fabled place that not only existed in books on Marcus Garvey or the Harlem Renaissance but in reality: the capital of Black (Nationalist) America, where fiery, independent scholars taught classical African history in community meetings and on the local airwaves, shaping those lectures into swords against white supremacy. Dr. Ben existed and thrived in what could be called The Harlem Century—the time between the too-brief era of the great scholar-activist Hubert Henry Harrison, the street-corner orator known as “The Black Socrates” who publicly introduced Marcus Garvey to its people, and now, the dawning of a new Harlem.

The man known as “Dr. Ben” joined his Ancestors on March 19; the morning of the first day of the annual meeting of he helped to found, the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations.

“Our People are now safeguarded [in] the After-Life by Dr. Ben, Dr. [John Henrik] Clarke, Dr. [Cheikh Anta] Diop, Minister Malcolm X, Elijah [Muhammad], The Honorable Marcus Garvey.....and many more of our Greats,” announced Leonard Jeffries in a quickly circulated announcement email.

“Though Painful [,] this is a Victory, that we had him for 97 plus [SIC] years,” continued Jeffries, retired professor of Africana Studies at City College of New York and one of ben-Jochannan’s unofficial aides. “We will be raising monies to make his Celebration Eloquent and we will message this and the arrangements.”

Jeffries and Professor James Small, another pioneering Africana Studies historian, had been the spokespeople for the ben-Jochannan family and its YouTube public face as his condition worsened. They updated admirers during the month while maintaining their vigil outside the specialized care unit in the Bay Park Nursing Home in the Bronx, where ben-Jochannan spent his final years.

New York City Council Member Jumaane D. Williams (D-Brooklyn), co-founding member of the council’s Progressive Caucus and a member of the body’s Black, Latino & Asian Caucus, said in a statement that Dr. Ben’s “extensive research on Egypt, black culture and history gained him notoriety not just among educators but people of more color across the world.”

"As Dr. Ben once said, 'trust is a continuous examination and fact... always supersedes belief.' It's my hope that all New Yorkers remember his prolific, eye-opening legacy and reflect on his thorough work for Afrikan people. We can take solace knowing that he did so much while here and has now joined the ancestors."

"So much" is an understatement. Dr. Ben educated more than two generations of activists while influencing classical African and Judeo-Christian historiographies and Pan-Africanist thought. He explained how the stories and teachings of Judaism and Christianity, for example, come from ancient Egyptian religious systems that existed thousands of years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Ben was Africana Studies way before it was in vogue. He taught at City College and Malcolm-King: Harlem College Extension from the 1950s through the 1970s. In 1976, during the end of the birth of Africana Studies as a formal academic discipline in American universities, he was given an adjunct appointment in the Africana Studies department of Cornell University, where he taught for several years.

He sponsored educational tours to the center of the ancient Black world—Egypt, the Sudan and Ethiopia—for at least three decades. And there and everywhere, the one fact he stressed— that the ancient Egyptians, proud members of the most advanced civilization in the ancient world, as well as the original Jews, were dark-skinned Africans—made him distinctive and beloved in Black radical circles and controversial in white communities.

Among those who followed the “street universities” in Black communities during the 20th century, ben-Jochannan was known as the hardcore, blunt face of African-centered thought to the sometimes more gentle public façade of his longtime friend and oftentimes lecturing partner, John Henrik Clarke (1915-1998).

Both taught members of the Harlem community through ben-Jochannan’s “First World Alliance” lecture series, which operated on weekends from 1977 through the 1990s. The series, which started in ben-Jochannan’s home, was moved to a local church when it grew in popularity.

On the street, in community meetings, in speeches and in articles in Black newspapers and magazines, “Dr. Ben” was often named in the same breath as Clarke, his fellow historian. But the staunch race-first Garveyite claimed he had strong ideological differences with his longtime broad-based African-centered leftist friend.

Like Clarke, ben-Jochannan became well-known in the New York metropolitan area in the late 20th century because of his many decades of frequent television and radio appearances on 1190 WLIB-AM, then a local Black news-talk radio station, and WABC-TV’s Black public-affairs mainstay, “Like It Is.” He became nationally known via “Night Talk with Bob Law,” National Black Network’s weeknight public affairs radio program. Like Dr. Ben and Clarke, these forums are either gone or changed in 2015.

B-3



(L-R) John Henrik Clarke, Yosef Alfredo Antonio ben-Jochannan and Chancellor J. Williams.

Everything about Dr. Ben was worldly, with a tinge of the ancient. The pioneering Egyptologist was born in 1918 in Ethiopia. Ben-Jochannan moved to the United States in 1940, after going to school in St. Croix, Virgin Islands and universities in Puerto Rico and Havana. He received his Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Havana.

Dr. Ben's 49 books, pamphlets and academic papers reflect his decades of teaching, research and activism around New York and the world. His most popular works included *African Origins of Major Western Religions*, *The Black Man and The Nile and His Family*, and *We, the Black Jews: Witness to the "White Jewish Race" Myth, Volumes I & II*. He self-published many of his works, but many eventually got picked up by Black Classic Press, a Baltimore-based independent book publisher of Black-oriented major nonfiction books. These works became underground classics in Black-consciousness settings from the waning days of the Black Power Movement in the late 1970s until today.

"Dr. Ben" remained a strong race man his entire life. Unlike many Black scholars who donate their papers to places like the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research unit of The New York Public Library system in Harlem or the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University, in 2002 ben-Jochannan donated his personal library—an estimated 35,000 books, ancient scrolls and manuscripts to the Nation of Islam.

His long love affair with Harlem was not without hardship. He was assaulted on a Harlem street in 2003, an incident that made national news in Black America. His son Nnandi was shot and killed in Harlem the following year. He is survived by two daughters, Ruth and Naomi Johannes, and other family members.

B-4