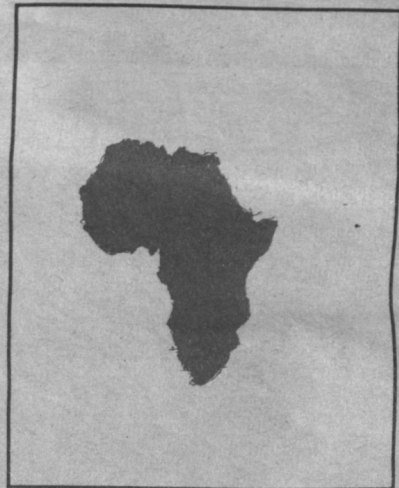


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Dr.
Asa
Hilliard

on
History,
African-
Americans
and
Education

History, Education and African-Americans

A discussion with Dr. Asa Balliard

by Timothy Aaron-Styles

Dr. Asa Hilliard is an educational psychologist and is a distinguished professor of Education at Georgia State University. He served previously as dean of the School of Education at San Francisco University.

Hilliard has specialized in the study of Ancient African Civilizations, especially Ancient Kemet. He has contributed to scholarly publications such as the *Journal of African Civilizations*, the *Teachings of Ptahotep*, and *African Presence in Early Europe*.

Recently he completed a thirteen part television and home video series entitled "Free Your Mind: Return to the Source - African Origins," in which he presents parts of his classic slide lecture on the documentation of ancient African history.

Timothy Aaron-Styles: Why and when did you develop an interest in history?
Dr. Hilliard: About the seventh grade or earlier. When I first saw Tarzan movies and didn't like them. And decided that I wanted to know what was true and what was accurate. I decided that I would always spend some time trying to uncover the truth about African people.

T.A.: Why did you decide to go the route of education as opposed to seeking a degree in history?

D.H.: Probably, like a lot of other young people, I toyed around with a number of different things. At one point I was going to go into medicine. I've never really felt that any particular occupation kept you from doing certain things. For example, I'm a psychologist. That's my primary field—educational psychology; you have to do a number of things as well. I've tried to develop some competency in linguistics, history and other fields, in order to enlarge the scope of what I try to deal with. The job title is not always the description of what you do. So, education seemed like the best vehicle for me because I knew I wanted to teach. I did minor in History when I was an undergraduate. But I chose to work as a psychologist because my primary interest was in learning, though I had not determined that I wanted to be a historian per se. I was interested in dealing with some of the problems of black student learning, low achievement, and so forth to boost that. So history was always a second interest to that. That's why I went into education.

T.A.: Some people criticize the educational system—the Western educational system—for two things. One, they say that the system doesn't teach people how to think critically. They say that the Western educational system doesn't teach people how to process information and it only teaches them how to store information.
D.H.: That's basically true. That's true. We live in a society that apparently does not have room for think-

ers—not for many. We are a mass production economy. And a mass production economy requires standard products that repeat efficiently the same type of action. For example, you don't want a critical thinker in many of the sales jobs we have in the culture. You want them to follow a routine. In fact, in many cases, you're told exactly how to sell, what language to use. I used to sell encyclopedias and I was given the exact language I was supposed to use. I wasn't expected to come up with my own or have the freedom to invent a style. So, this is a mass production economy and I don't

to be dominated. In fact, to erase historical memory is one of several steps that anyone who wants to dominate someone else has to do. When colonizers took over Africa, the first thing they had to do was to erase the memory of the African. When slave owners brought slaves to America, they had to erase the memory of Africa, and then, in the slave process, they had to erase the memory of revolts. They had to erase the memory of resistance. They had to erase memories of successes. They had to erase the memory of independence. Because memory has the power to

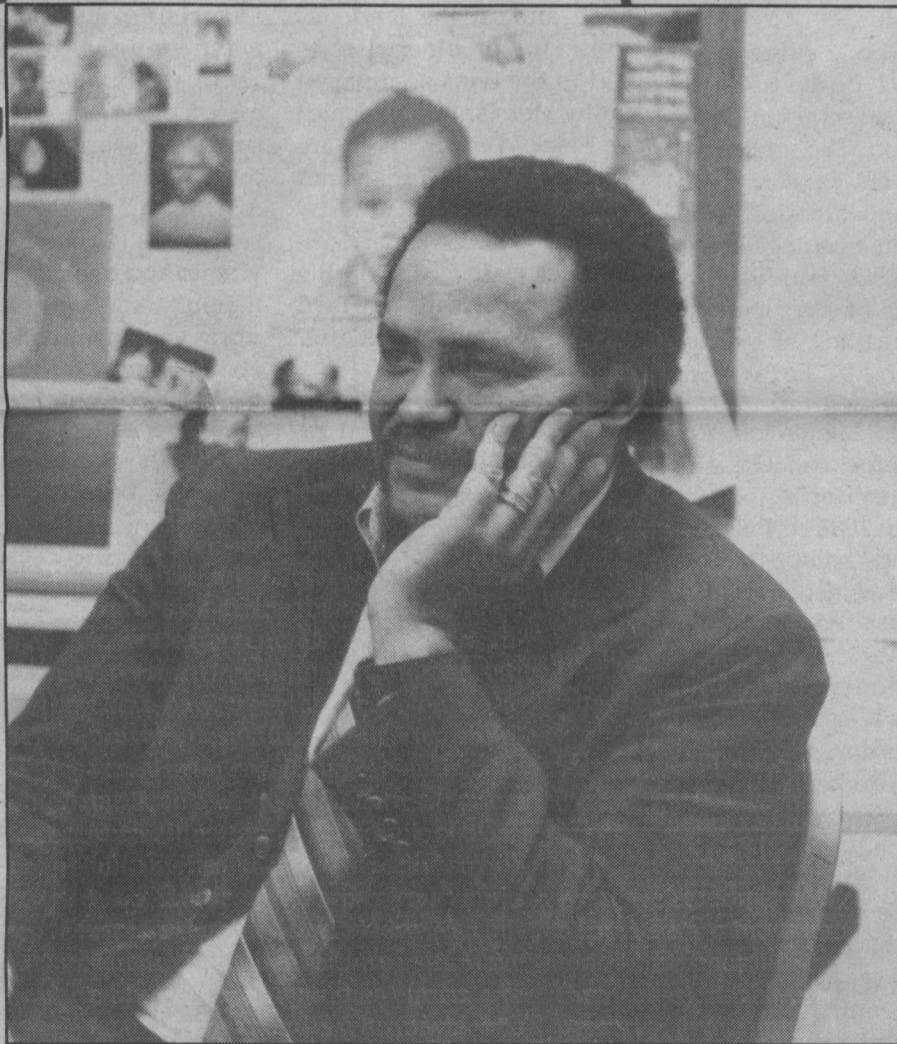
tant reason. To mobilize. Clearly, we have to take a more independent stance than we've taken before because you can't count on anyone else other than yourself in the long run. Probably the second reason would have to do with the fact that if you want to know the truth, you can't know the truth in ignorance of African and African-American history. You can't even know the truth about European history if you're ignorant of African history.

T.A.: Exactly what do you mean?

D.H.: Well, a lot of European history was produced by Africans or influenced by Africans. So if you want to understand Europe, if you want to understand European architecture, take Greco-Roman architecture. It's an imitation of African architecture. So if you start with the Greco-Roman and you don't know what came before and if you don't know what was happening on the Nile River a thousand years before the Greeks began to build buildings like the ones we associate with them then it will look as if these things were immaculately conceived in Athens and Sparta. That's simply not true. So you can't tell the true story of the history of Europe if you don't know the history of Africa.

T.A.: Once an individual discovers historical truths, of historical truth, what will that do for him or her? How will historical truth transform them?

D.H.: I don't think any historical truth, but I think it's the perspective you get when you have a collective of historical information. For example, one of the most important things for African people and African-American people is to have a view of ourselves as participants rather than as spectators in the historical process. To see ourselves as having a creative role rather than a passive observer role in the historical process. It makes all the difference in the world. If you think of yourself as a spectator, it puts your intellectual faculties to sleep. It makes you vulnerable to manipulation. It makes you understand yourself. Clearly, you have to feel it's critically important that any human being feel themselves to be a part of the creative historical process. Otherwise, you're not alive. It affects motivation. It affects interests. It affects everything about us that's important. It's like John Henry Clarke says: you need that in order to know what time it is. You can't put any meaningful interpretation on what's happening to you right now. It's like not having a watch. It's like not having a map. In other words, you don't know where you are if you don't have a historical perspective that has continuity, that starts with a beginning, a middle, and an end. I don't know where I'm going if I don't have historical memory. The best comparison I can make is with an individual. If something happened to



think it calls for much thinking. And then that's not only true on the production side, but it's especially true on the consumption side. I think that if you look at the mass media—the kinds of movies that are being sold—I don't think Hollywood really appreciates thinkers. They want people who are going to be entertained which really doesn't require a lot of thought.
T.A.: The second criticism of the educational system has to do with history, especially the history of African people. Many feel that our history is deliberately excluded from the educational system.

D.H.: Well, that's been true historically. To a large extent, if it isn't deliberately excluded, it's ignored. It was a conscious part of the scheme to control black people. That's a universal activity. A universal rule for domination is to control historical memory for the people who are going

stimulate mobilization in individuals and in groups. So that was actually a conscious part of the process of domination. And a lot of that is left over in the present educational system. In other words, if you spend 400 years doing that, then you can't simply in 1954, because you have a law that outlaws segregation say: "OK. We'll just take what we got now and make it available to everybody." Because what you have now contains the world view that was created during the 400 year period which eliminated the history of African people from that content. So you have to work just as hard to put it back as they did to take it out.

T.A.: Twice as hard in many instances. Besides mobilization, for what other reasons should people, particularly African people, study Ancient and modern African history?

D.H.: I think that's the most impor-



you and you lost your personal memory, you can imagine how difficult it would be for you to navigate Atlanta if you couldn't remember where you live. If you would see people and you couldn't tell your family from your non-family members. If you didn't know where your bank account was. If you didn't know whether you had graduated or had not graduated. In other words, you would be disoriented because of the fact that we have lost our historical memory.

T.A.: So history can be scientifically applied to political struggle?

D.H.: I think history is inseparable from political struggle. I don't see how you can function politically in any effective way in ignorance of your history, in ignorance of history in general. In other words, you must also know the history of your enemy as well as the history of your friends. As well as your own history.

T.A.: In your assessment of the Western educational system, do you feel that the exclusion of African studies, or African history, is confined to white universities? Or are African-American institutions at fault as well?

D.H.: Any traveling that you do to universities will show that it's a universal problem. It's a problem in both black and white universities. For example, there are only a couple of black universities that have really strong black studies programs. You would expect the opposite. Howard University and Atlanta University have had strong black studies efforts and faculty in other areas who may not be in black studies, but who have that perspective. But there are lots of other black universities and colleges that give almost no indication of an emphasis in these areas. In part, that's due to the fact that the support of all of these universities is really a common kind of support. We're drawing from the same pool. When you move back beyond the president's level and ask who's on the board and who controls the board, of both white and black colleges, usually it's the people from the white private sector who have the money. Be that through philanthropy or even government allocations. If you ask who is it that controls that, then you will get some sense of who's paying the piper. And they usually call the tune.

T.A.: Should we begin to develop our own historical institutions, our own institutions, that teach us our own history?

D.H.: I think that's critical. I think

that any successful group of people on the face of the earth makes history a priority. They make culture a priority. Both history and culture. They're the same thing. Culture is



what we're doing now, but since it happened a minute ago, it's history too. But people who care about themselves develop institutions to preserve, to legitimize, to expand, to use their history and culture. In other words, this is not left to chance. A good example is what happens with white Americans. They have always spent multi-billions of dollars to preserve the history of Europeans. That's why we have departments of History in the major universities. They're really departments of European history. That's why we have a Smithsonian Institute in Washington and a Library of Congress. The problem is the reason we don't see it is because it seems like a normal natural part of what a nation or state would do for itself. And that's true, it is a normal and natural part. The problem for us is we're not a part of that normal and natural process. So the resources that we would ordinarily give to the preservation and development of history and culture we don't have to give. Then after a while, we lose consciousness about the necessity to do it. Even with the scarce resources

we have, we tend not to give it. We even move into positions where we do something I call "cultural surrender." We give up and even reject our own history and then begin to orient toward other people's history as if it were our own.

T.A.: What happens to a people that would make them surrender their own culture and surrender to another people's culture, a foreign culture?

D.H.: Domination. Under the condition of domination there are certain predictable patterns. Fanon was very clear about this identification with the aggressor. It was picked up by Albert Memmi in his book, "The Colonizer and the Colonized," which was written shortly after Fanon's books, "Black Skins, White Masks" and "Wretched of the Earth." All it says is that the rule is when one group of people dominates another that many of the people dominated, in seeking relief, consciously or unconsciously, will identify with who they consider to be strong. And that's their master. And they will imitate the behaviors of that

lay in assuming those kinds of roles. And we find ourselves doing similar kinds of things. If we could only imitate those people that we consider to be strongest then we'll be more acceptable, not only to them but to ourselves. I think of it as what Frances Wellsing calls, "pro-racism." Racism is the behavior that you see engaged in by people who have power to make rules in the system. "Pro-racists" are the ones who imitate those who have power.

T.A.: I have a friend, a good brother, who believe that if Europeans or white people had the correct information about us their attitudes would change. No more racism. They'd start loving us. He feels that most racism is a result of their not having the correct information. I disagree.

D.H.: Well, I don't understand what produces racism. Racism is....I think produced by....I did a study on racism and I did a lot of reading on where it comes from. The two things that kept popping up from people who looked at this systematically is that racism comes from fear and greed. In other words, when one group of people is afraid of somebody else. And that's not necessarily because of ignorance, it could be because the other group is powerful. For example, many people who (the people who conquered Africa, in some cases) had information about Africans. They knew that Timbuktu was there. They knew Kemet was there. They knew what they would do. Yet, they went in and took over. That's because of greed. Africans had something that Europeans wanted so they took it. If there are a lot of Africans who can take it back, then you got fear. That doesn't have anything to do with how much information you have. So I'm not sure that information alone really answers the questions of the political and economic relationships that exist among people. I'm sure there'll be some people who have built their opinions and their lives around certain kinds of myths. That if you can destroy the myths, they'd be disoriented. They may even shift their position. But in the long run, I don't think that most people understand that fundamental motor that drives conflict between people, fear and greed. As long as the fear and greed are there, it won't be long before racism can be invented.

T.A.: Thank you, Dr. Hilliard. Hotep.

D.H.: You're welcome. Hotep, my brother.

