

## **Refereed Articles**

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# ***African Ameripean Adult Education: An Historical Overview of Selected Activities***

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### **Abstract**

A wealth of historical literature exists that documents the role of African Ameripeans as both producers and consumers in the field of adult education. The educational activities of this group were both formal and informal and constituted such diverse programmatic goals as assimilation/acculturation, selfethnic liberation, and empowerment. Although not cited in the adult education literature to the extent warranted, the intellectual and sociocultural histories of this group show that from the time of their arrival as slaves into America, they have assumed the responsibility of educating their own adult population. This article is an historical overview which focuses on only selected organizations, activities, and materials. The author's intent is to contribute to the historical base of adult education and to introduce sources that will facilitate an appropriate analysis of African Ameripeans in the development of adult education. In doing so, a discussion regarding Plantation Education, Selfethnic Study Materials, and the Bronze Booklets is presented.

### **Introduction**

An "African Ameripean" (as coined and defined by the author of this article) is any person of African descent born in America. Traditionally, this racial group has been referred to as Black, Negro, Afro-American, or African American. Three major histories have been written about the field of adult education (Adams, 1944; Grattan, 1971; Knowles, 1977) and two interpretive histories (Cotton, 1968; Stubblefield, 1988). Two of the three major histories (Adam, 1944; Grattan, 1971) have provided no information on the specific contributions of African Ameripeans. The two interpretive histories (Cotton, 1968; Stubblefield, 1988) also have neglected to record specific contributions of this group to the field. Addi-

tionally, even after Knowles' (1977) study of the movement, the only African American organizations he mentioned in his history of adult education were the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

A review of mainstream adult education literature as reflected in the handbooks and yearbooks of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) from 1936 to 1948 resulted in only four descriptions of mainstream adult education activities for African Americans: two in Ely (1936), one in Rowden (1934), and one in Rowden (1936). Any reference to selfethnic (those provided by and for members of the race) adult education activities in the literature were also absent until the 1970s with the appearance of articles by McGee (1971, 1973), House (1977), DeVaughn (1986), and, recently, Stubblefield and Keane (1991). Selfethnic—written without the hyphen—denotes a sociocultural meaning and an historical significance that is grounded in the Africentric world view. This view is reflected in the conceptual synthesis of the descriptions *self* and *ethnic*; it represents the revitalization of a traditional perspective in that the concepts of individual and groups are a false dichotomy. There is an irrevocable bond between the members of the race and the collective whole. As such, the use of the descriptive term *selfethnic* reflects the underlying principles of generic and cultural linkage and responsibility. There is an emerging body of literature that focuses on the roles of this group both as providers and participants of education programs and as producers of theories and philosophies of adult education (Bailey, 1991; Colin, 1988, 1989; Days, 1978; DeVaughn, 1975; Guy, 1992; Hutchison, 1975; Morgan, 1979; Neufeldt & McGee, 1990).

The purpose of this article is to highlight educational activities of African American people. The activities selected for inclusion in this article—plantation apprenticeship, selfethnic study materials, and the bronze booklets—are examples of adult education for and by African Americans.

### **Plantation Apprenticeship**

Adams (1944) and Knowles (1977) placed the initial development of white American adult education at 1607, with the arrival of the colonists in America. Miller (1914), Woodson (1919), McGee and Neufeldt (1985), and DeVaughn (1986) suggested that adult education for the African American began in 1619 with the arrival of the first African slaves. This is based upon the following observation:

Slavery was an institution of learning as well as labor. The Negro's taskmaster was also his schoolmaster. In order that he might accomplish the crude tasks imposed upon him, it was necessary that he should be instructed in the rudimentary principles and crude methods of its accomplishment. Slavery was always under the paradoxical necessity of developing the slave as an instrument while suppressing him as a person. . . . [T]he Negro became domesticated, if not educated, in the university of slavery, whose diploma admitted him to practice in the wide arena of the world's work. (Miller, 1914, p. 16-17, 18)

Thus, the education which was provided for African American adults by mainstream providers prior to the 1900s, beginning with slavery, was vocational. These vocational institutions (i.e., plantations) provided the slaves with those skills that would enable them to function as slave laborers (Albanese, 1976; Blassingame, 1977; McGee and Neufeldt, 1985; Miller, 1914; Spivey, 1978; Webber, 1978; Woodson, 1919).

The justification for this type of education was that the level of skills taught to the slaves was equal to their level of intelligence. This rationale fulfilled a basic function, but, in doing so, highlighted a glaring contradiction:

We see that those who must confidently proclaim that the Negro, by nature, is incapable of comprehending the intellectual basis of the Aryan culture are ever on the alert to prevent him from attempting the impossible. If the Negro's skull was too thick to learn, as the dogma ran, why pass the laws forbidding him to try. (Miller, 1914, p. 147)

There are those who would question the validity of the view of slavery as an adult education enterprise. This view is supported when we consider that at the time of the establishment of the colonies, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the African slave population to be 1,600. Furthermore, at the time of the first census in 1790, this population had grown to 750,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1979). Given that the majority of slaves were adults, it justifiably can be said that the system of slavery was a massive adult education program.

Accordingly, although not recognized in the same way that large-scale, white American adult education—such as the Town meetings, the Lyceums, the Chautauquas, and the Mechanics Institutes—is recognized, the plantation system was one of the largest adult education programs operating in early America. It was here that the African slave was Americanized and taught to labor in a new environment. Adult education

clearly was not limited to vocational curricula; friends taught friends and families taught families via the anthropocentric, oral-tradition mode of learning. This is evidenced by the existence of “Native Schools” which existed prior to those established by the Freedmen’s Bureau in the 1860s. These schools were a continuation of the selfethnic literacy activities initiated by the slaves prior to the Civil War (Alvord, 1866; Blassingame, 1977; Cornelius, 1983, 1991; Gainey, 1986; Mellon, 1988; Webber, 1978).

### Selfethnic Study Materials

Another example of this group’s adult education involvement is the self-study guidebooks published by African Ameripeans for members of their own race. One example was published in 1896. The full title of this volume is *The College of Life or Practical Self-Educator, A Manual of Self-Improvement for the Colored Race, Forming an Educational Emancipator and a Guide to Success, Giving Examples and Achievements of Successful Men and Women of the Race as an Incentive and Inspiration to the Rising Generation, Including Afro-American Progress Illustrated, the Whole Embracing Business, Social, Domestic, Historical and Religious Education*. The editors of this extraordinary book were Henry Davenport Northrup, Joseph R. Gay, and I. Garleand Penn.

The fact that this volume exists is significant unto itself; further, because it was edited and published by African Ameripeans for their own race, it provides documentation that the race not only participated in adult education activities but understood the importance of such participation—particularly when the stated goal was selfethnic development. This is reflected in the objectives of the editors of the volume, which were “to afford the valuable information needed by a large class of men and women who are engaged in the responsible duties of active life, and to place within the reach of parents a valuable guide” (Northrup et al., 1896, p. iv). Accomplishing these objectives would be no small feat for a people 33 years out of official slavery. Yet the authors and editors of this volume hoped to accomplish this through providing the members of their race with selfethnic reflectors such as:

Portraits of many successful men and women of their own race [and] engravings illustrating Afro-American progress [to be] introduced [as] object lessons of the great advancement of their own people, impressing them with the fact that they must educate and elevate

themselves if they would attain success in life. (Northrup et al., 1896, p. iv)

The volume is divided into six books: *Book I-Rules of Etiquette for All Occasions; Book II-Courtship, Marriage and Domestic Life; Book III-How to be Healthy and Strong; Book IV-Business Rules and Forms; Book V-Manual of Practical Suggestions and Useful Information for the Home and School; and Book VI-Choice Selections of Poetry From the World's Best Authors*. Its contents reflect what the editors considered to be practical information and knowledge which covered every aspect of life. For example, there were sections subtitled: Bookkeeping and Penmanship, The Current Use of the English Language, and How to Organize Societies; in addition, an Encyclopedia of Valuable Information and Important Facts for Reference was included (Northrup et al., 1896). What is equally significant is the inclusion of self-ethnic knowledge as reflected in the sections subtitled: Thirty Years of Advancement and Achievement of Successful Men and Women.

Of particular relevance to the field of adult education is the Form of Constitution for Lyceums with a list of 102 questions for discussion regarding philosophical, social, and historical issues. Examples of those questions include:

Which was the greatest orator, Demosthenes or Cicero? Note: the discussion of this question must include reference to style, aim and effect; artistical, mental, and moral power. . . . Has Nature or education the Greater Influence in the formation of Character? . . . From which does the mind gain more knowledge, Reading or Observation? . . . Are the Intellectual Faculties of the Dark Races of Mankind essentially inferior to those of the white? . . . Have Mechanics Institutes answered the Expectations of their Founders? (Northrup et al., 1896, p. 447-449)

This guide on the establishment of lyceums is significant. The historical literature describing the development of adult education refers to the lyceums as one of the foundational cornerstones of the adult education movement in America (Bode, 1956; Cartwright, 1945; Grattan, 1971; Knowles, 1977). Northrup et al. (1896) also referred to the adult education activities of African American organizations—specifically to the establishment of lyceums. One particular reference was to the lyceum of the Quinn Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The exact date

of the establishment of the Quinn Lyceum is not known; however, we can assume that it occurred between the founding of the church in 1844 and the publication of this volume in 1896. Another enlightening aspect of this volume is the editors' consistent reference to the African ancestors of African Americans. The volume, for example, was dedicated "to the great African Race, numbering many millions in the United States of America" (Northrup et al., 1896, p. iii). Lastly, there is a section on Secret Society Organizations and Officers which additionally documents African American participation in adult education activities. In this section, the motivation of the African American race for participation in non-formal, voluntary self-help organizations is explained by the editors.

Our people have not been slow to see the advantages arising from combined effort. They believe in societies for mutual improvement, . . . it is safe to say that a very large proportion of our people are enrolled as members of organizations, of one form or another, all aiming to promote the moral, social, and material welfare of those connected with them, and helping to sustain them. (Northrup et al., 1896, p. 71)

In summary, then, African Americans understood that only through self-ethnic collective and collaborative efforts could the goals of self-ethnic reliance be achieved. This volume, with its numerous books for self-directed learning, is an example of material produced to help individuals or small groups to educate themselves first by noting and celebrating their self-ethnic identity and second by providing information for self-ethnic development.

### **The Bronze Booklets**

In 1935 the Rosenwald Fund and the Carnegie Corporation funded the publication of a series of booklets which were to be used in adult education programs sponsored by the American Association for Adult Education. The series was named *The Bronze Booklet Series*. Publication of these study materials by The Associates in Negro Folk Education was the outgrowth of adult education activities that were provided for African Americans in Harlem and Atlanta beginning in 1933. The content was to be reflective of the African American experience in America and to focus on the cultural, economic and historical development of the race. As stated by the publishers,

The BRONZE BOOKLET SERIES is planned to bring within reach of the average reader basic facts and progressive views about Negro life. The booklets will present the Negro's own view of his history, problems and cultural contributions with competent Negro scholars as spokesmen. But they are addressed not merely to the growing Negro audience that desires to know itself more fully, but also to that wider general audience which is beginning to face the Negro and the race question more fairly and with intelligent open-mindedness. ( Hill, 1937, n.p.)

Initially, there were to be nine booklets: *The Art of the Negro* and *The Negro and His Music* by Alain L. Locke; *The Negro in American Drama* and *The Negro in American Fiction and Poetry* by Sterling Brown; *The Economic Side of the Race Question* by Abram Harris; *World Aspects of the Race Problem* by Ralph Bunche; *Experiments in Negro History and Achievement* by Carter Goodwin Woodson; *Social Reconstruction and the Negro* by W.E.B. DuBois; and *Experiments in Negro Adult Education* by Eugene Knickel Jones. The books by Jones, Woodson, Harris, and DuBois were not published. However, Ira De A. Reid's *Adult Education Among Negroes* was substituted for Jones's booklet, Arthur A. Schomburg's *Negro History in Outline* was substituted for Woodson's booklet, and T. Arnold Hill's *The Negro and Economic Reconstruction* replaced DuBois's work (Aptheker, 1973; Hill, 1937).

Of significance is the fact that the educational objectives of the booklets were to influence "a constructive program of adult education among Negroes and of stimulating the study of Negro life and culture by adult education groups in general." Of even more significance, however, is the mainstream response to those African Americans whose view of the world and whose suggested solutions were not deemed appropriate by the mainstream. As stated earlier, these booklets were to reflect the race's experiences as perceived by the African Americans. In line with this, DuBois suggested that the title of his booklet be changed to *The Negro and Social Reconstruction*—a change to which Alain Locke, as editor, agreed (Aptheker, 1973). Nonetheless, what Locke and the AAAE were not willing to agree to regarding DuBois's booklet were his Africentric view of the situation and his suggested solutions. DuBois no longer viewed integration as the only feasible option, advocating rather the development of self-ethnic pride and unity and the establishment of the race's cultural, educational, and economic institutions outside the mainstream.

In 1936, a year after DuBois submitted his manuscript, Locke informed him that his booklet would be published, but without the "Creed." Within six months, DuBois was informed that although the booklets would go to print the following month (November) the committee decided "that it would be inadvisable to publish your manuscript: *Social Reconstruction and the Negro* in its present form, largely because of its frequent references to specific situations of public program and policy" (Aptheker, 1973, p. 85).

This is an interesting response when considering the policy statement printed in the bookplates of the series:

Believing that progressive thinking on the question of Negro life will best be stimulated by frank discussion and vitalized opinion rather than by over-objective and colorless analysis, *The Committee of the Associates in Negro Folk Education* has no program or thesis of its own and has placed no restrictions upon its authors. Opinions and views throughout the BRONZE BOOKLET SERIES accordingly, will represent solely those of the respective authors. (Hill, 1937, n.p.)

Apparently, the Bronze Booklets had to be not *too* Bronze when published as mainstream adult education literature and funded by mainstream foundations. The AAAE did not want to relinquish to the authors the control of the content of their booklets as had been promised. Assumably, they were reluctant to publish an Africentric perspective because it would appear as an AAAE official publication.

### Conclusion

The African American adult education activities discussed in this article are examples of the Liberator-Selfethnic Model which is based upon the Theory of Selfethnic Reflectors (Colin, 1989); thus, these activities are viewed as a pro-active approach to education. A selfethnically conscious people is believed to be less likely to permit themselves to be subjected to psychological and physical abuse. The providers of various types of African American adult education activities understood the basic psychosocial need of community survival in the larger community. The adult educators who were involved in the activities described here sought to develop strategies aimed at eliminating the effects of racism and thereby improve the quality of life for the African American race. Accordingly, the activities described here focused on developing racial pride and on



raising the race's level of selfethnic consciousness.

The research relative to the adult education activities of African American organizations may result in a broader understanding of the purposes and methods that were utilized by this group in their selfethnic, sustained educational enterprises. There are, however, many areas of African American adult education which deserve further investigation. Some of these areas, for example, are: The Knights and Daughters of Tabor, founded in 1871; The National Association of Colored Women, founded in 1895; The American Negro Academy, founded in 1897; and The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, founded in 1915. These organizations, along with the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the National Baptist Convention, were involved in literacy education, cultural education, and continuing professional education (Hawkins, 1902; and Johnson, 1902). Additionally, they published reading materials that expanded the adult readers' knowledge of African American selfethnic history, and they provided a frame for the critical analysis of the world and their place in it. For example, in 1915 The National Baptist Convention published Morrisey's book, *Bible History of the Negro*, which documented the African ancestry of biblical characters. In 1918 The African Methodist Episcopal Church published Mitchell's Book, *The Questions Before Congress—A Consideration of the Debates and Final Action by Congress Upon Various Phases of the Race Question in the United States*. This book is a critical analysis of those issues which historically influenced the status of African Americans in American Society.

The history of the participation of African Americans in the field of education is an area of research that has unlimited possibilities. The study of this group's adult education activities would generate data relative to philosophies, purposes, curricula, and motivational factors. Due to the volume of fugitive literature and the fact that the history of this group has been generally ignored by social and educational historians, this article has in no way exhausted the resources that are available for an appropriate analysis of the role of such literature in the development of adult education in America.

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