

Black Women Defining Self in the 21st Century: An African Centered Perspective

La Francis Rodgers-Rose, Ph.D.

Founder & CEO, International Black Women's Congress

Abstract

In 1998, the paper, "*Reconstructing a Model of Black Womanhood for the 21st Century*," was presented upon invitation from the African Studies Department of Tennessee State University. Published here, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose explores in this paper crucial questions: "What should be the self-defined identity and image of Black womanhood, and what is the ideal model of Black womanhood for the 21st century?" Toward answers, emphasis is placed on the importance of Black women knowing their history, starting with humanity's origin story where the Black woman was the first woman. Discussion turns to the history of the first civilizations in Africa—with a focus on ancient Egypt, which was Black. The task of Black women defining self is contextualized within the challenge of having been defined by a group of people who had not come out of the cold caves in Europe when the great Egyptian King, Amenomope, III espoused great wisdom and values more than 6,000 years ago, such as "Beware of robbing the poor and of oppressing the weak and helpless" (Karenga, 1984, *Husia*, 58). Compelling images of Black womanhood are identified in ancient Egypt's Hatshepsut who served as Pharaoh more than four thousand years ago; and, in Queen Tiye who was the powerful wife of Amenhotep, III and served as secretary of state. Citing ancient Egyptian text, the *red dress* is embraced and advanced as a symbol of Black women's feisty nature, queenship, and spirit—having value for Black women in contemporary times engaged in the task of defining self. Moving forward across the span of centuries of African American history, eight models of Black womanhood are presented to guide Black women in defining self: Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), Anna Julia Cooper (1859-1964), Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931), Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961), Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977), and Betty Shabazz (1936-1997). To facilitate a return to African centered womanhood, Dr Rodgers-Rose evokes the "Queen, Seer, and Leader" as African models to follow, as well as the ancient Egyptian principle of Maat to guide contemporary Black women's striving for truth, justice, and righteousness. Finally, there is the presentation of an original model of African centered womanhood based on 20 Black cultural attributes to guide Black women's return to self and re-creation of self—as the most important task for Black women in the 21st century.

Keywords: Black women, identity, enslavement, history, Egypt, Hatshepsut, Queen Tiye

Introduction

In the 21st century, the question of what should be the self-defined identity and image of Black womanhood is crucial. How we define ourselves may be the most important thing we do in the immediate future. No one can do it for us. Who we are and how we should live our lives should be defined by us. It is, in a general sense, a collective process but must be practiced by individuals. Our sense of womanhood, then, must grow out of the values and lived experiences of Black women. We are concerned with how Black women, who know who they are, discern, and make known the nature of things. That is, by what process do Black women come to know the laws and causes of reality? In fact, if any group of women can make sense of the world, tell *real* truths, it would be Black women who were the first to right the scales of justice, to speak truth and walk in the way of righteousness.

The Importance of Knowing Our History

We must study our history that stretches back to the beginning of humankind. Our concern is how can we reconstruct our own history, our sense of self in our own image—that is, in the image of our Ancestors, our foremothers? It is not an easy task since every effort has been made to keep us away from our true selves. The closer we have gotten to our history, to ourselves, the greater the effort has been to make sure that we become confused and move away from our center. The Black woman was the first woman created in Africa somewhere near Tanzania more than three million years ago. Unless we can begin to piece

Address correspondence to:
La Francis Rodgers-Rose, PhD
International Black Women's Congress
Norfolk, Virginia

together that early history and bring it forward to the first great civilizations of Ethiopia and Egypt, we will not be able to answer the question of “What is the ideal model of Black womanhood for the 21st century?” Our history did not start four hundred years ago on slave ships that landed in North America. It stretches back farther than the Greek and Roman empires. It made Alexander “Great” and laid the foundation for the major religions of the world. So much has been done to keep us away from the ancient Egyptians. It has only been because of the persistent scholarship of Black scholars that white Egyptologists must now admit that the first nine dynasties of Egypt, which covered more than nine hundred years, were Black. This says nothing of the thousands of years that led up to the dynastic periods. That is, one cannot start with the first dynasty of Zoser and the Step Pyramid, which dates back at least 6,500 years, as if Egyptian history was not already in existence. It was under Khufu in this same early period that the Great Pyramid of Giza was built. A people cannot just step out on human history and say that we will build a structure 481 feet high, at the geographical center of the earth’s land mass, the most perfectly aligned building to true north and made of two and one-half million stones weighing two tons each. This knowledge could have only come into existence as a result of thousands of years of accumulated knowledge. Browder (1992) says, “There is more stones in the Great Pyramid than in all the cathedrals, churches and chapels built in England since the time of Christ.” In more contemporary terms, “the Great Pyramid of Giza was built to a height equaling a forty-five story building and with enough stone to build thirty Empire State buildings” (Browder, 1992, 110).

What I am suggesting is that the first two thousand years of Egypt’s history was Black, and when there was mixture, it was with Asians, and the Asians bought nothing to Egypt. They were invited guests. Europeans did not come until another fifteen hundred years, about 600 BC, and they bought nothing. So much of our history has been stolen and given back to us as if the Europeans created it. Cheikh Anta Diop (1978) tells us that “The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt.” Without this correction, we will continue to turn to Europeans to validate who we are and what we are to become.

The Need to Remember Who We Are, What Happened to Us, and Get Back to Ourselves

In this second decade of the 21st century there is an all-out attack against people of African ancestry—whether we are talking about the newly “freed” South Africa, where whites still control most of the wealth and land, or the warehousing of more than 900,000 Black men in the criminal industrial complex system, or the blatant killing of

Black boys, or the racist disrespect of the President (Barack Obama), or the criminalization of Black women for alleged welfare fraud. We can no longer speak our truths, raise questions about the continued racism in a country that only addressed its “four” hundred years of exploitation of Blacks for ten years (1968-1978), and have been on a recovery project ever since. We are, Aaron Gresson (1995) suggests, facing a situation where the victim has become the villain and the villain the victim; he calls this “*the white male recovery project*.” In the rhetoric of recovery, every major form of mass media has been used against us. Even those Blacks that we managed to get hired in the late 1960s read the evening news with no regards of its impact neither on us nor on how we are characterized.

Those who allegedly speak for us often speak for the oppressor. Whites can now stand on the sideline and appear to be the good guy/hero as Blacks attack each other—many times making the argument that we are complaining about things that we could fix ourselves and are largely responsible for creating. And we have also turned from ourselves—busy trying to be somebody else, trying not to look like ourselves. We are confused and don’t know which way to turn. Even when we try to look like them, act like them, they still turn against us, ignore us, while continuing to steal our images—(e.g., putting collagen in their lips and hips); they have stolen our music—love songs that we wrote about each other and now have us singing those songs to them. They have given us back our culture and artifacts as television specials.

We, as a consequence, lose our life force, when we no longer respond to who we are—the Queens, the seers, the original woman created by God—and we die a spiritual death. I shake the hands of Black women and cannot feel their life force. Their hands are like tissue; their grip is like a wet dishrag. They don’t make eye contact; their heads are bowed; and their shoulders round. We have changed our hair—bleached it; bone straightened it, and we are still confused. We have changed our eye color; we like green eyes, hazel eyes. We have changed our nose; we like long, sharp-pointed noses. We have changed our skin color. We still don’t know who we are: the Queens, the original, not a copy of anybody. How can an original be from a copy? No wonder we are confused. How can a Black woman be the first woman to be created, the first to walk, the first to talk, the first to give birth, the first to be a wife, to establish a family, and turn around and copy from someone who came much later than us? How do we copy from your children? We have forgotten that the great Goddess Nut, with her defined natural hair, long body and big Feet swallowed the sun—Amen Ra—in the evening and gave birth to him in the morning. We know Amen Ra! We end our prayers with his name—AMEN!

We have forgotten the burnt bronze skin of our Egyptian Ancestors who plotted the movement of the planets, created science, literature, and religion and built the great Pyramid

of Giza and the Temple of Karnak. We have forgotten what they looked like. They were, after all, Black. We are truly confused. We have changed our minds. We don't know what to call ourselves. We let other racial and ethnic groups discuss and decide what we call ourselves. We are reluctant and or embarrassed to talk about our enslavement in America.

We were the enslaved and not the enslaver/the master. We must never forget that our presence in this country is a result of Europeans coming to Africa and taking us from our motherland. We must never forget the millions of our Ancestors who died in our holocaust and whose bodies lie on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean in unmarked graves waiting for us to claim them. We think reparation is a joke. We must never forget the millions of Black girls raped before they could come into their womanhood; the millions forced to give birth to some white man's baby as he and his wife accused her of enticing him. We must never forget the women beaten to death because they refused the advances of some white man; we must never forget those women who toiled in the fields from sun up to sundown and then went to their poorly structured cabins and cooked, cleaned, sewed, nurtured their children and loved their husbands.

We must never let anyone trivialize our enslavement and the sacrifices of our Ancestors who made "cotton king;" who built the mansions but could not sleep in them; who were forced to respond to names other than their own; who were forced to appear dumb while they had full control of their master's house and his children.

We created southern cuisine as the master and his wife copied our recipes and sold them as their own. We do not raise questions about the psychological makeup of those who enslaved our Ancestors and continue to oppress us: i.e., a people who would have an enslaved African serve them dinner or fan them nude; who would take his wife and children to a picnic to watch an African being hung and burned alive; who used the sacred writings they stole from us to justify the enslavement of them; who created a psychology to explain the "insanity" of Africans who ran away from their enslavers; and who continue to justify their racist behavior by creating new theories of the alleged "inferiority" of Blacks. We would rather study the psyche of the oppressed than the oppressor. It is safer and the rewards, mainly for whites, are greater.

How did we get so far away from ourselves, so far away from our intended purposes? The first step, I suggest towards alienation was the taking away of the *red dress* from the Black woman. In Karenga's (1990) translation of the ancient Egyptian text in *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*, Chapter 104, written more than 4,500 years ago, it says:

**Hail to you, Sekhmet-Bastet
The Eye of Ra
Mistress of the Divinities
Plume-wearer
Lady of Bright Red Linen**

The symbolism is not only the *red dress*, but the yellow, the orange or any of the colors that speak to our beginnings in Africa—in the sun continent. We wore bright colors. We had a way of behaving, a way of carrying ourselves, a way of walking. The *red dress* is a symbol of our feisty nature; the symbol of our queenship; the symbol of our spirit. When I was growing up, they told me I was too dark to wear red; and told my girlfriend that she was too light. What it meant was that nobody could wear red. We just could not wear any of the colors that just might cause us to remember our collective consciousness of who we really are—the Queens, seers, and leaders. We need to get back to our colors; back to our *red dress*, back to ourselves.

As Diop (1978) maintains in the *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, no other people in the world have given the woman the centrality in culture that Africa has given. Africa, after all, is called the motherland not the fatherland. Because of the life-giving ability of women, they are revered, respected. What they say is important. Africans know, from the beginning of humankind, that nothing comes into existence without a woman. She is the deliverer, the giver of life. Life, then, consists of equal parallels. The just society, one based on the principle of Maat—truth, justice and righteousness, must be balanced.

Black women have gotten out of balance as we have copied the behavior of women who do not come from our culture—women who come from a culture that has little respect for women and sees them mainly as sex objects; and does not respect them or their opinions. White women have gone on to create their conception of feminism. It has really been an exercise as in a "white women recovery project"—a process of defining global women issues from the perspective of Anglo middle class women. White women have always been concerned with getting their share of the power, their share of the jobs that white men control. They are concerned about "their glass ceiling," not all women. It is largely from their perspective or reactions to their perspective that Black women entered the arena of women's issues, or what Alice Walker calls "womanist" issues; and caused Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith (1982) to suggest, "all the Blacks are men, all the women are white, but some of us are brave." It has caused Patricia Hill Collins (1991) to wrestle with the whole question of Black feminism and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) to call for African womanism. Much of the feminism discussion has nothing to do with Black women and we waste our precious time entering an arena where the game is not our game and the rules have little to do with us.

To the extent that Black men have internalized the values and behavior of white America and how it treats women, and Black women are not operating from their own center, we see them defining themselves as an extension of Black men rather than as co-equals. We find Black women who feel that they cannot become somebody unless a man tells them—defines them. When this happens, Black women will take anything from a man including physical and psychological abuse; they lose their self-respect, their dignity, their minds.

We find ourselves being defined by a group of people, who had not come out of the cold caves in Europe when the great Egyptian king, **Amenomope, III** more than 6,000 years ago advised: “Beware of robbing the poor and of oppressing the weak and helpless. Raise not your hand against the aged nor address an elder with improper speech” (translation by Karenga, 1984, *Husia*, 58). Or when he said, “Let us steer a righteous course so that we may carry the wicked across without becoming like them. Raise them up, give them your hand and then, leave them in the hands of God” (Karenga, 1984, *Husia*, 59).

We must get back to ourselves. We must find the *red dress*. We must reclaim our history. Our history, as is the case with all history, is a continuing process of reading, re-reading, revising and reconstructing. The past does not change, but the questions we ask to connect the past to the present do change. We must harness our history in the service of humankind. It is after all individuals, ordinary people, who make and change history. We must redefine our womanhood—our philosophy. *The Husia*, the sacred writings of the ancient Egyptians, says, “speak right and do right. Truth comes to her in its essential form, shaped in the sayings of the ancestors” (Karenga, 1984).

The moral foundation of ancient Egypt was in the image of a woman, Maat. It is said that on the Day of Judgment your heart must weigh no heavier than the feather of Maat. Our image of womanhood comes from: **Hatshesput**, who served as Pharaoh more than four thousand years ago and said, “I have brought order out of chaos;” and from **Queen Tiye**, the wife of **Amenhotep, III** and secretary of state who had power. More than four thousand years ago, women could vote, own property, hold office. They were the guardians of the royal lineage.

Historical Models of Black Womanhood for Returning to African Centered Womanhood

As we move forward in history, there are numerous models of Black womanhood that tell us how we should define ourselves, what moral standard we should have. Through their lives, we know that we must return to the source and fetch that which we left behind—our African centered womanhood.

Some of these historical women are remembered, as follows:

- **Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)** took that name so that everyone would know “my so journey in life is a movement on the truth.” She said, “I speak the truth.” She was an eloquent speaker. At the 1848 women’s convention, (the white women were not sure they wanted her there in the first place) she said, “that man over there says a woman can’t do this and can’t do that. I have plowed, worked as hard as any man, had five babies and nobody heard my cry but Jesus and ain’t I a woman?” When Frederick Douglass was depressed over the closing of reconstruction and was upset about the plight of the newly “freed” enslaved Africans, Sojourner asked him, “Frederick, is God dead?” We need a 21st Century Sojourner Truth—we need a new movement on the truth.
- **Harriet Tubman (1820-1913)**, who through her behavior told us that “no one can do anything to a Black woman when her mind is made up;” a woman who was able to make nineteen daring trips to the South and bring three hundred enslaved Africans to freedom, traveling by the light of the moon and stars. She never lost a person and was known to pull a gun on those who thought they were too tired to go on. Some of us today are too tired to make one trip across town to help our sisters. Where are our Harriet Tubmans today? Who will save the lives of Black women infected and affected with AIDS; those being dropped from the welfare rolls with inadequate preparation and will surely, with their children, become homeless if somebody doesn’t do something to help?
Anna Julia Cooper (1859-1964) was a political activist, intellect and leader. She said “It isn’t what we say about ourselves, it’s what our lives stand for.” She further said, “Only black women can say when and where I enter in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage; then and there, the whole race enters with me.” No one tells the Black woman when and where I enter—not the white man; not the white woman; not the black man. Only the Black woman can say when and where I enter in the quiet dignity of my womanhood.” Is your womanhood quiet? Is it dignified?
- **Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931)** nearly single handedly called the world’s attention to the politics and economics of lynching Black men. Through her writings and speeches, the world became aware of the racism of lynching. Although her life was threatened many times, she continued her commitment to free Black people from the evils of white supremacy. She was fearlessly devoted to justice, which often placed her in physical danger and social isolation. We need an Ida B today to speak out against the politics and economics of the prison industrial complex, against race, gender and class bias of the “white male recovery project.”

- **Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961)** had a belief in racial unity and race pride that predated Marcus Garvey, as was evident in 1900 when, at the age of twenty-one, she wrote an article entitled, “Not Color, but Character.” In it she said, “What every woman, who bleaches and straightens out need, is not her appearance changed, but her mind.” In her school, the National Training School for Women and Girls, everybody had to take a Black history course. Her motto was. “We specialize in the wholly impossible.” Further, she insisted “We must have a glorified womanhood that can look any man in the face—white, red, yellow, brown, or black—and tell them of the nobility of character within black womanhood.” She further said in 1917 “Blacks must serve notice on the world that they are ready to die for justice.” Can we say today that we are ready to die for justice? Or, do we know what we are willing to die for? If we don’t know, we will die for anything. When we know what we will die for, we take better care of our health—both physical and mental. Nannie Helen Burroughs crafted her own identity, defined her own sense of African womanhood.
- **Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955)**, the longest serving president in the history of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History—the organization that started Black history month—knew who she was. She often expressed pride that pure African blood flowed in her veins. She believed that “Black women were to carry the steady up lifting and cleansing influence to the struggle.” She understood what our ancient Egyptian Ancestors meant when they said that your essence, your soul comes from your mother. With this essence, she started a school, which later became Bethune-Cookman College, with \$1.50. She was always concerned about our youth. She said, “We are the heirs and custodians of a great legacy.”
- **Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977)** was constantly under attack for her human rights leadership on behalf of Black people. She knew what she was willing to die for—being nearly beaten to death in 1963 in a Mississippi jail for registering Black people to vote. Fannie Lou had only a sixth-grade education and was a sharecropper, but challenged the all-white democratic delegation to the 1964 convention. This dynamic leader, dynamic speaker, great singer, refused to compromise when two seats were offered to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party—the party that had been founded by four women. When the men wanted to take those seats, Fannie Lou said “I didn’t come this far for two seats. You either seat all of us or none of us.” Her motto was “I stand on the truth.” Her truth was the truth of Maat—the truth of the ancient Egyptian people. She was a righteous woman, who

defined her womanhood and left a standard and model of what we must do: fight for the victory of all African people.

- **Betty Shabazz (1936-1997)** was married to one of the most beloved Black leaders of the 20th century—Malcolm X—at the age of twenty-two. And by the age of twenty-eight she had given birth to four daughters and was pregnant with twins when she witnessed her husband’s assassination in 1965. She had led a sheltered life—never really having to make a living on her own. Betty said, “I didn’t have to go on, but had no choice having been the wife of such a committed person.” She was always conscious not to do anything to compromise Malcolm’s legacy and was determined not to let anyone else do it either. Not only did she go on, but she returned to school and earned a doctorate in education administration and became an activist in her own right. Betty Shabazz became a role model for women who wondered how they could go on. She was protective of her children and grandchild. She died doing what so many Black women have done, nurturing and raising a troubled child. She believed that we must “find the good in something and praise it;” and she said “I did the best I could.” Can you say you are doing all you can do?

Return to African Centered Womanhood: Queen, Seer, Leader

How will you answer the question raised by the ancient Egyptians in their sacred writing: “In the day of vindication, the day of judgment, will you be able to say that my soul lifts itself up before my heart and is found to be righteous on earth? Will you be given your heart, which comes from your mother?” (*Husia*, Karenga, 1984). All of these women—Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer and Betty Shabazz answered in the affirmative on the day of vindication. They were African centered women. The burning question for us today is: “***Are we building on the great legacy left by these ordinary Black women?***”

Many were born enslaved, some had a college education, others were poor sharecroppers, some could not read or write, and others were self-taught.

How do you see yourself as we enter into a new millennium? Would our Ancestors be proud of us? Have we brought our people any closer to freedom, any closer to justice, and any closer to our defined true selves?

To come back to ourselves, we must: 1) decolonize our minds; 2) attack the “white male recovery project;” 3) recover our voices; 4) reclaim our African history and culture; 5) affirm ourselves; and 6) affirm our sisterhood.

Carter G. Woodson (1933) in the *Miseducation of the Negro* said, “When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.”

African Centered Womanhood: A Model

What then is a model of African womanhood for the 21st century? What can we carve out for ourselves that speaks to our historical sense of self? In the sense of the ancient Egyptian principle of Maat, we must strive for truth, justice, and righteousness. We must establish and be the moral standard of the community. Our lives must be uncompromising. This, then, is a guru African womanhood perspective. It is the best of the best. When you do most of these, most of the time, you will find yourself—you will be the Queen, seer, and leader.

I propose a *Model of African Centered Womanhood*, having 20 attributes, as delineated, below:

- 1-We oriented**—extended family, raised with other women and girls, self-defined, rites of passage, raised with elders
- 2-Respect for elders**—including older sisters and brothers, as elders must remain in our presence, speaking and acting with respect
- 3-Spiritual**—healer, seer, midwife
- 4-Fair minded**—treat people right; speak the truth, do justice
- 5-Doer**—always doing something; make the most of what you got
- 6-Planner**—think before speaking and acting
- 7-Modest**—carry self with dignity; moral character
- 8-Loyal**—to family, friends, and the race
- 9-Leader**—participate in both large and small tasks, keeping the family together
- 10-Warrior**—willing to die for justice
- 11-Intellect**—teacher, value learning, get something in your head
- 12-Committed**—work for justice
- 13-Steadfast**—supportive, never give up, no job too small or large, durability
- 14-Diligent**—do a job well, doing what has to be done regardless of the circumstances, make something out of nothing
- 15-Organizer**—activist
- 16-Sisterfriend**—non-jealous, sharing
- 17-Strong**—determined
- 18-Articulate**—speak with power and truth
- 19-Self-assured**—wears her clothes
- 20-Self-knowledge**—The key that unlocks the universe

Conclusion

In *There’s a River*, Vincent Harding (1981) tells us “our only real chance is to create new theory, to create new practice, to create new ideology, to create new hope, to recreate ourselves, building them all on the solid reality and particularities of our terrifying and glorious experiences in this land” (p. 45). Will you wear your *red dress*? Wear your colors? Know that we are the originals—an original cannot copy a copier, our children.

Getting back to ourselves is the most important thing we can do. Will we answer in the affirmative, “my soul lifts itself up before my heart and is found to have been righteous on earth”? The time is now, the hour is late, and your mother is calling you.



Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose is the Founder and CEO of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC).

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