

Campus Voice: Blacks Must Protect, Preserve Culture

Editors note: Campus Voice will be an ongoing article featuring writers from campuses all over the nation. The purpose is to give a different perspective on black college life. This week's issue was written by Steven R. Johnson, a junior at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Living in the United States of America, the land of the free and brave, African Americans exist in a state of cultural subjection and subversion.

It only holds to reason that within a democratic society, the largest and most dominant culture, group or class will tend to set the values, goals and agenda of the less dominant groups. In order for less dominant groups to subsist or prosper in this type of situation they must learn to identify with some of the values of the more dominant group in order to share power (i.e. assimilate & integrate).

Hence, throughout the vast social and cultural movements that have marked the struggle of African-Americans- there has always emerged an ideological dichotomy regarding the agenda for social progress: Nationalism vs. Integrationalism.

Nationalism can be defined as a collective agenda formulated on the basis of ethnic similarities, which

serves as a guiding force for the group(nation). Integrationalism is the idea that groups should not separate themselves by ethnicity; that groups should seek to become one with the larger society (the great melting pot). This dilemma was not resolved by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois; nor with Garveyism; nor during the Harlem Renaissance and not even during the civil rights / Black power era.

Even today on integrated campuses there are extreme efforts, on the part of so-called minorities, to erect structures to develop and protect culture in the midst of a culturally hegemonic society. Why has this burning issue not been resolved? Why do black students feel the need to have black student unions and/or black cultural centers?

The effort to maintain cultural autonomy while at the same time trying to discard cultural distinctness has left many nationalistic surges in a state of ideological flux. Why would an ethnic group want to be free from judgement on the basis of ethnicity at one moment; but at the next, demand the recognition of ethnic autonomy?

This question is one of survival. By what means can African people in America survive? Can success best be attained through the complete abandonment of traditional culture (i.e. mass



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acculturation into the 'dominant society); or by the complete rejection of assimilation (which ultimately results in the rejection of mass integration)? In analyzing the true essence of the problem, I can conclude that the former question is not only inadequate, but is the wrong question to ask. The more appropriate question is one of control. How does an ethnic group participate in this democratic society? The ability to control cultural forms should be the question.

Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans are groups that have a culture that can fend off the influences of cultural dilution. Those groups have a highly developed cultural philosophy

within the confines of this society. The African American community has been open to the manipulation of values, arts, economics and politics by the dominant culture. The struggle to develop control over African American culture is the true battle of African Americans in this day. This battle may really be won within the plutocratic environment of the modern day integrated college.

As black students strive for the missing piece to their cultural puzzle, agents who operate within the dominant culture will mock and belittle their attempts. Some will ask "Why do blacks need something only for themselves; isn't this perpetuating segregation?"

The reply to this tricky logic rests in the right of a group to insulate its sacred beliefs while simultaneously seeking the benefits of a democratic society. The Constitution ensures and encourages these rights, so they must be realized by African Americans for African Americans. Other cultures are able to operate in this fashion, but African Americans have never managed to develop an ideology that would allow them to do the same.

That is why black cultural centers must be erected and black student unions must be formed; to serve as a common platform for the

under-developed philosophy of African Americans; to serve as a developmental and protective cultural entity.

The conceptual conflict of interest that exists in the minds of African-American students in integrated colleges must be solved from within cultural bounds- an external solution won't do. The African-American students' ideological agenda must be reordered so that this problem may be confronted and analyzed. They must provide the cultural forms that will be sufficient for the purposes of protecting and developing sacred values, beliefs, practices and traditions.

This is the black students' burden of the 1990s. As black students fight this battle once more it is crucial that they understand their history and learn of the ideological blunders that have sabotaged the freedom movements of African Americans in the past.

Anyone who is interested in furthering their understanding of cultural subjugation and hegemony should refer to the following: The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual by Harold Cruse; The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B. DuBois; and Circle of Culture by Sterling Stuckey.

The Need For Unity

Unity. Just a five letter word, and yet so powerful in meaning. The concept of unity is simple. Webster's defines it as putting or joining together so as to make one; combine. Yet and still we have so much trouble achieving this harmony.

We, as African Americans, have been divided for too long. Our ancestors, who were slaves, were divided into house and field Negroes. Throughout the years, this division has been transformed and passed on so that in 1992, we are still divided; the only thing that has changed are the boundaries. Our divisions read like a prize-fight ticket: urban blacks vs. rural blacks, college educated blacks vs. those with no education and upper

classes vs. the lower classes. Even us "educated folk" on campus are separated by differences such as: students vs. athletes; light-skinned vs. dark-skinned; and greeks vs. greeks.

Why argue over such petty matters? The bottom line is that we are all African Americans, blacks, negroes, colored or however you want to label yourself. We have no reason not to be unified. You know as well as I do that in any given store, we as black youth can be labeled as thieves. Every black male can be viewed as a suspect for the work of a misguided brother. Sounds like we have a lot in common.

Although unity involves a sense of oneness, it does not mean that

we all are going to think and act alike. It doesn't even mean that we are going to agree with everything that our brothers and sisters do. There are still going to be many differences in thought. Change will take place only when we maintain a certain amount of respect for each other. Respect is the foundation of unity. Without it we will not be able to come together as a people.

If we respect each other's views, then regardless of whether or not we are in agreement we will lend support to our brothers and sisters.

Case in point, take the Nation of Islam. One does not have to practice their religion in order to support them. Why is this so? Because they command or demand total respect.

As blacks on a predominantly

white campus, we have enough problems dealing with racial relations. At some point we all need support from our brothers and sisters.

Take the time to evaluate yourself: Do you support and uplift your fellow brothers and sisters—even the ones you don't like? If it takes more than an instant to respond, maybe you need to check yourself.

Let's put aside petty criticisms, let's stop dividing among greek fraternities and sororities; after all you were black before you were greek—although some do not to believe this.

Let's support and show respect for the brothers and sisters that serve as our housekeepers.

Because I know decades ago it would have been our parents with the same jobs.

The time for unity is now. We can no longer afford to be separated along artificial boundaries. This year, in particular, we need to stand behind and support each other because no one else will do it for us. I'll be watching your back—I hope you can say the same for me. Think about it.

Peace and God Bless,
Corey Brown