

Comprehensive Report for 2007 Ma'afa Week

Presented by the Office of Programming and Outreach
Center for African and African American Studies

Prepared by Melonee D. Griggs, Program Coordinator/Outreach Specialist

The Center for African and African American Studies' first ever Ma'afa Awareness Week began on November 26, 2007 at Sophie B. Wright Charter School (1426 Napoleon Avenue) with presentations by genealogist Antoinette Harrell (along with actor Bruce Winters) and Umar Bey of the Black Inventors and Scientists Museum. Ms. Harrell began her presentation by discussing with the nearly two-hundred 7th and 8th graders about the importance of understanding their heritage, particularly African Americans, within their families and talking and learning from their elders. She demonstrated to the students how she conducts interviews as a genealogist with actor Bruce Winters, who dressed up as a haggard, working class gentleman. Many of the students in the audience were convinced that the man was real and were intent on hearing his message that the youth of today must find their way back to their heritage, rather than being "lost". Umar Bey concluded this event with a free-spirited discussion about the inventions by African Americans that make every day contemporary life manageable. Overall, his message to the students was to take their education seriously and to protect your teachers because they could be the next inventor, rather than the next "superstar".

On November 27, the Center hosted a panel discussion titled "To Be Black: Reflections from Black African and African American perspectives". The panel was moderated by Melonee Griggs, Program Coordinator and Outreach Specialist for the Center for African and African American Studies; panelists included Dr. Romanus Ejiaga, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for African and African American Studies, Dr. Felix James, Professor of History, Linda Hill, Curator and Archivist for the Center for African and African American Studies, and Josephine Okoronkwo, Director for the Student Development Center. Questions included the following:

- How do you identify yourself (i.e. Black, Negro, African, or African American)?
- Are we disconnected as Black people or is that a natural progression because of slavery?
- In your opinion, how is your culture perceived in the media and what are its positive/negative affects on other's perceptions about your culture?
- Are African Americans lost in terms of knowing their roots/heritage? Are Black Africans lost in terms of knowing their roots/heritage, even with African Americans? Do Black Africans have a certain responsibility to reconnecting us? Whose responsibility is it?
- What does it mean to be a man? How is manhood portrayed in your culture?
- What have been some of your experiences as a Black woman in your culture? Is there a perceived or accepted role women must play?
- Do Black Africans have a similar reverence and curiosity about African Americans in terms of their culture and experiences?

With over 30 students, faculty, and staff present, the riveting discussion extended itself throughout the reception. There are plans for a second panel discussion in the Spring 2008 semester.

On November 28th, CAAAS' Curator/Archivist hosted another Cultural Diversity panel in partnership with genealogist Antoinette Harrell. On the same day, local author Deborah Cotton held a lecture and book signing on her recently published text, Notes from New Orleans. Cotton moved to New Orleans 3 months prior to Hurricane Katrina. She describes her book as "a first-person comic-tragic account of life in New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina". The book reminds us of the truly human nature of our New Orleans: food, politics, and love! As an added bonus, the Center provided free copies of the book to the first 30 attending this special event. With over 20 people crowded in the Center to hear her speak, Cotton read two excerpts from her book: 1) meeting the revered Austin Leslie, former owner of Pampy's in the 7th Ward and the inspiration for the 1980s television show, Frank's Place; and 2) discerning the contradictory nature of New Orleans' mayor, C. Ray Nagin, during Hurricane Katrina and the issues concerning rebuilding efforts in the lower 9th Ward. Former councilman, Oliver Thomas, was in attendance and was a great surprise for all those in attendance. The CAAAS hosted a Creole inspired luncheon (Cotton's favorite type of cuisine) following her discussion.

Finally, on November 29th, the Center for African and African American Studies hosted their annual Kwanzaa event, which has evolved into a festival. This year's festival's major objective was to reflect the seven principles of Kwanzaa. Below, the culmination of the event is headed by these seven principles, which were developed by Dr. Maulana Karenga:

Umoja (unity) = To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race

This event proved that Southern University at New Orleans can come together for the sake of celebrating Kwanzaa and all that it represents. A great number of faculty, staff, and students were represented in the audience and on the program. The students and faculty from Sophie B. Wright Charter School were embraced by our campus, as well as all of our vendors.

Kujichagulia (self-determination) = To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves

Another wonderful facet to our annual Kwanzaa Festival was our essay and poetry contest. For Sophie B. Wright students, the essay question was "What is the importance of Kwanzaa to ourselves, our families, and our communities and what can we learn from the celebration's principles?" The winner, Robyn Faulcon, wrote an exceptional essay that went as far as relating the principles of Kwanzaa as solutions to the issues we are faced with after Hurricane Katrina and the rebuilding our communities. So Southern University at New Orleans students, the poetry contest theme was "Honoring the Ancestors, Remember the Ma'afa". The winner, Nikkeisha Napoleon-Breaux, wrote the powerful poem, "The Ma'afa Song" which riveted the audience with its power and ethos; the poem was written in honor of the journey of our ancestors who endured the various ma'afas such as slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and Hurricane Katrina. The poem even evoked the names of African American leaders and citizens, long forgotten, who lost their lives during the struggle for freedom and equality.

The Sophie B. Wright Charter School's Drama Team and African Dance Team had presentations of their own. The Drama Team, headed by Mrs. Nicole Bajoie, entertained

their audience with a creative, amusing, and lively Kwanzaa skit (influenced by the seven principles of the holiday) that included songs, dance, chants, and history. The African Dance Team, headed by Jamani Andrews, showed their skills of African dance. Both groups adorned themselves in African dashikis, skirts, and head adornments.

***Ujima* (collective work and responsibility) = To build and maintain our community together and make our brother's and sister's problems our problems and to solve them together**

The CAAAS office of Programming and Outreach developed a partnership with Sophie B. Wright Charter School faculty in order to make this event possible. Starting in late September of this year, planning for this event began with an initial meeting with social studies, dance, and drama teachers at Sophie B. Wright and they all expressed enthusiasm about participating in the event. Through successive meetings, phone calls, and rehearsals, this year's Kwanzaa Program would not have been successful without the hard work and diligence of Sophie B. Wright faculty and students who went above and beyond the expectation. With the success of this year's event, we are encouraged to make this a yearly cooperative.

We also developed a partnership with Whole Foods Organic Market, who donated a plethora of fruits and vegetables for the *mazao* (Kwanzaa symbol for crops). Representatives from Whole Foods, Jennifer Pagan and Christina Bradford (Community Relations Coordinators for Whole Foods Market at Arabella Station), even did a presentation called "The Foods of Africa" in the University Dining Hall. It was important to have healthy and organic food demonstrations during this event because of the troubling statistics concerning African American health.

***Ujamaa* (cooperative economics) = To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together**

This year, we wanted to make our annual Kwanzaa event more into an open air festival, so it was decided to have local African American vendors and businesses to be involved in our event, especially those who have been adversely affected Hurricane Katrina.

Michele Lewis of Afro-American Book Stop was the first vendor we contacted and not only was she able to bring her now mobile book store to our campus during this year's event, but she also assisted us in the purchase of an authentic Kwanzaa set. Sula Janet Evans and Andaiye Alimayu of King & Queen Emporium brought their afrocentric goods, along with scented oils, candles, and incense; as members of Zion Trinity, they provided a lively and heart-felt performance during our Kwanzaa program. Finally, Family First Creations (an affiliate of the Black Inventors and Scientists Museum) sold posters that list inventions by Black Inventors. In all, our vendors had collective sales of over \$500.

***Nia* (purpose) = To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness**

The Black Inventors and Scientists Museum returned to our campus on the day of the festival and housed their presentation in the University Center. The lessons of this exhibition had a profound impact on students and faculty/staff who visited the exhibit; all were surprised to learn of the contributions of African American inventors and were

encouraged to know that our culture has greatly impacted and influenced the course of contemporary life.

In addition, Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective concluded the Kwanzaa Program with a riveting a drum entrance, which was the signal to call forth our people. During this entrance, students and faculty/staff came out of their offices or left their previous distractions to the event center. As we witnessed this, the founder of Kumbuka, Ausetua Amenkum, took the time to briefly discuss the history and influence of African dance to our own culture and the power it has in our lives and history. In their 30 minute performance, they were able to pull men, women, children, faculty/staff and students to the dance floor to display their greatness through dance.

***Kuumba* (creativity) = To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it**

This entire event reflected the creative energy of all participants and vendors. For all those in attendance, the entire event was meant to revitalize their energy and love for our culture. With the vivid colors of those who wore African prints and of the decorations on display, the event was a beautiful display of Kwanzaa.

***Imani* (faith) = To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle**

With attendance of over 200 students, faculty/staff, and visitors, we can say that this year's Kwanzaa Festival was an overwhelming success. With the conclusion of the Kwanzaa Program, the Center held an Appreciation *Karamu* (feast) for our maintenance and purchasing staff because of their diligent service to the SUNO campus. All Kwanzaa participants and vendors and SUNO community were invited to this feast. Through showing our appreciation for those who are of service to us, we must never forget that our ancestors have been of service and have made a way for us today. We must sustain the legacy of service within our culture to ensure our success. Surely, with the success of this event, we have faith that our struggle will not be in vain. On the back of every Kwanzaa Program, the *tamshi la tutaonana* (the farewell statement), written by Dr. Maulana Karenga, was printed for all to remember:

Strive for discipline, dedication, and achievement in all you do. Dare struggle and sacrifice and gain the strength that comes from this. Build where you are and dare leave a legacy that will last as long as the sun shines and the water flows. Practice daily Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba, and Imani. And may the wisdom of the ancestors always walk with us. May the year's end meet us laughing, and stronger. May our children honor us by following our example in love and struggle. And at the end of next year, may we sit together again, in larger numbers, with greater achievement and closer to liberation and a higher level of life.