

Festival Celebrates African Culture, Promotes Learning
By ARZU TITUS, N.Y. #3 Joint Territory Bureau Chief
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It seemed like an ordinary day. But to the African American community of the New York joint territories, it was the beginning of a much-needed and long-awaited learning process. By the end of the day, 1,500 people of different cultures had attended the Imani festival, titled "Coming Home — Together." (*Imani* is a Kiswahili word that means faith.) More remarkable than being the largest number of participants to ever attend a single activity at the New York Culture Center was the fact that 433 of the attendees were guests.

The celebration of African American cultures began with a ceremonial procession of drummers and dancers — both guests and members — outside the New York Culture Center. The procession members, like many other attendees, were mainly dressed in extraordinary African and Caribbean outfits, with many women in floor-length scarf skirts in purple, pink, yellow, orange and other vibrant colors, and men in silk turbans, skull caps and beaded fezzes.

Children, some in straw skirts and matching straw armbands, entered first, followed by teens in lavender and blue African outfits, some with oblong drums strapped to their bodies. The dancers were barefoot and many carried beautiful beaded African dolls. As the procession members streamed through the door, they were greeted with *ujambo*, the Swahili word for welcome home.

As the group entered the main Gohonzon room on the second floor, about 30 participants took to the stage to dance and drum. A festive song was sung in Swahili that contained the phrases "All things are possible" and "There is nothing that cannot be done."

After a group dance by teens and numerous solo dances, the drummer led the group off the stage and out of the room, leaving the audience with the sense of having just attended a wonderful celebration in an African village. And this feeling of shared community and culture persisted throughout the extraordinary six hours of performances that followed.

One of the most unforgettable performances was given by David Pleasant, who drove home the stark psychic and artistic costs of slavery in the United States. "They took our drums away," he told the audience. He explained that the slave masters had felt severely threatened when they learned that Africans used drums to call a gathering. Mr. Pleasant made clear in his performance, however, that banning the drum did not destroy its power.

Instead, African American slaves learned to call out to one another by stomping their feet, tap-dancing, playing tambourines and beating on sticks. During his energetic performance, he played the harmonica while stomping his feet and slapping his hands rhythmically on his forearms, providing an unforgettable demonstration of the resilience of the human spirit.

New York, like the rest of America, is not alien to racism, and consequently, neither is the SGI-USA. Rather than pretend that this great evil and divider of peoples doesn't exist, a group of youth division members have taken initiative that any supporter of multiculturalism would applaud. About a year ago, in September 1996, some members of the African Diaspora representing the four New York joint territories unofficially formed the Imani Group. (*Diaspora* means the dispersion of any people of common origin, culture, etc. When used in the phrase "African Diaspora," it means those of African descent who have come to live in other countries such as the United States.)

They, together with members from other cultural backgrounds, came together to encourage efforts by all people to accomplish the following: promoting awareness, education and understanding within the SGI and our global society about people of the

African Diaspora; building pride and leadership among all people through self-awareness study; and building respect through cultural exchange and dialogue.

“In a city like New York, where people identify with so many different cultural backgrounds, sharing cultural presentations allows us to appreciate the beauty of one another’s culture,” said David Kasahara, an SGI-USA senior vice general director. “In a sense, this was the first such effort in New York. On Oct. 12, we will celebrate Latino heritage at the Corazon Latino culture festival at the culture center.”

Needless to say, the Imani members have endured much resistance, primarily from people who insist the problem of racism does not exist and from others who at first did not understand the objectives of the group and mistook it for a separatist movement.

Gordon Skinner, Imani Group member and also a founder, said: “The Imani is not promoting the type of multiculturalism that is separatist, exclusive and celebrates one culture at the expense of another. On the contrary, we wish to celebrate all cultures by creating more opportunities to learn about each other.”

Amelia Moran, New York #1 Joint Territory women’s division leader, was impressed by the unity of all types of people working together to make the event happen. “People from all ethnic backgrounds participated and felt a part of it, including many, many friends of the SGI,” she said.

The group’s desire is to promote educational forums and cultural activities that bridge gaps and clear up misunderstandings. Their hope is to encourage members of all cultures to support the SGI and continue to “come home — together” now and in the future.

Judging from the enthusiastic response of the multicultural group who attended the day’s event, the group has taken a very positive step toward realizing its dream.

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