

IDENTITY AND ASSERTIVENESS By Tayari kwa Salaam/AHIDIANA (1979)

Black Women are triply oppressed and exploited by class, race, and sex. If we are to overcome these forces and develop ourselves, we need confident rather than insecure, courageous rather than fearful and keen rather than dull women to wage this battle. Secondly, it is important to be assertive because it is only through this bold, insistent expression of self will we take control of ourselves and our environment and achieve our full potential individually and collectively as Black Women and as Black People.

Assert means to put forward boldly and insistent. Assertiveness, in a social context, is the definitive and purposeful expression of who we are. By definitive we mean reflective of our true identity. By purposeful we mean reflective of our purpose, or short-range and long-range goals. In order to actualize an assertive expression of our identity and purpose, we must establish a direction, a plan, the “how” we, specifically as Black Women, must move in order to achieve our goals. Thus, we say that assertiveness is rooted in our identity, purpose, and direction.

We develop assertiveness in four ways: (1) develop a true self-determined identity, purpose and direction, (2) identify and change beliefs and values which are barriers to assertiveness, (3) politically and technically develop ourselves, and (4) daily struggle to be assertive.

STEP ONE: DEVELOP IDENTITY

In order to be assertive, we must begin to answer these questions: Who am I (Identity)? What do I want and need out of life (Purpose)? How can I go about accomplishing my goals (Direction)? Let us first discuss and offer an understanding of the first question: Who am I?

WHAT IS IDENTITY? To identify is to define or name. Making definition is the first step toward controlling ourselves and our lives, that is having power. The first step toward assertiveness is to begin to identify or name who we are. Identity is a definition of who we are – a self-definition, that is, a definition which we as conscious Black Women define. When we say self, we mean a combination of many different realities.

These realities consist of four elements, two factors, two aspects and four characteristics.

The four elements are (1) body – the physical, (2) mind – the mental, (3) soul – the social, and (4) consciousness – the political.

The two factors are (1) the material factor and (2) the social factor.

The two aspects are (1) the individual aspect and (2) the collective aspect.

The four characteristics are (1) true or (2) false, (3) self-determined or (4) imposed.

Each of these realities and characteristics, both individually and in combination, must be defined and analyzed in order to grasp who we are.

TWO ASPECTS AND TWO FACTORS OF IDENTITY. If we combine the four elements of our identity, the two factors and the two aspects of our identity we will find that we are a combination of our individual material, individual social, collective material and collective social realities on the physical, mental, social and political planes. Let us analyze some of many possible combinations so that we might begin to grasp what we are suggesting here.

Our individual material reality is composed of physical attributes which we gain at birth and normally cannot change. Examples of such physical attributes are hair texture, skin color, and sex. Individual material reality also includes physical changes which affect us and may have occurred because of an accident, e.g., loss of a leg or arm, or as a result of disease, e.g., sickle cell anemia.

We are born with a genetic pool which is made up of a combination of half of each of our parents' genes so that we are similar to but not identical to our parents as well as our parents' parents, and their parents and inclusive of our entire ancestral line. Our genetic pool determines skin and hair color, height, blood type and sex. It even determines such less adaptation to heat and cold, type of ear lobe and such insignificant characteristics as to whether we can roll our tongues!

Our material individual reality also includes inherited diseases such as sickle cell anemia, leukemia, diabetes, hypertension, and childhood diseases. Being a handicapped person is also part of our individual material reality. Being inflicted with

cancer, as a result of smoking cigarettes, or any other diseases we develop because of the type of lifestyle we follow is also part of our individual material reality.

But the material cannot be separated from the social because the social influences the material. For example, a family can have a history of diabetes not only because this disease is inherited, but oftentimes, because of the family's social practice. For example, diabetes can be socially influenced by a family's over consumption of sugar and low-fiber foods, b) a family's inability to discipline themselves in fighting against bad eating habits that support this disease, and c) their negligence in educating themselves about diabetes.

Another example is a person's sex. Sex is not only a physical or material factor but is also a social factor because females and males are socialized and shaped to follow patterns designated by this society as feminine and as masculine.

Our individual social reality is determined by the relationships we have with other human beings and the nature of these relationships. In this society, individuals fit into various social categories. But because the motivating forces of this country are capitalism, racism and sexism, all social categories are not accessible to everyone, particularly Black Women.

For example, men in this country may be involved in family relationships, labor relationships, professional relationships, and/or in a special social category for men which is labeled "Bachelor." However, most women in this country are limited to two of these social categories: family and labor. This is the case because women in general do not receive the social conditioning, education, nor support to even consider pursuing a profession, that is, a self-determined lifework which you do regardless of, and over and beyond a job needed for a livelihood. Also, women are discouraged, threatened, and molested when we live as single women outside of the context of a traditionally defined family structure. There is no stigma attached to men being bachelors, but single women are called "old maids."

Our material and social realities affect who we are, and we must analyze them honestly if we wish to make a true assessment of our individual identity.

The above discussion gave examples of our individual material and individual social realities. Briefly, an example of our collective material reality is our race.

Genetically Afrikan-American people today are a result of the breeding among predominantly Afrikan people here in the U.S. This is a physical or material fact that we all share, therefore, it is a reality that is both collective and material.

An example of our collective social reality is our class. Most Afrikan-Americans are members of the working class. Therefore, this is a reality that is both collective and social. These two realities, our race, and our class, affect who Afrikan-Americans are. We must analyze them honestly if we wish to make a true assessment of our collective identity.

FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITY. As we develop ourselves, we are better able to analyze and therefore better able to define or identify who we are. Through this process of analyzation, definition, and development, the many realities which make up our identity can have a true or false, imposed or self-determined character. When we say true or false, we ask the question, does it correspond to reality, does it correspond to what is? When we say imposed, we mean thrust upon us without regard to ourselves and our needs or simply resigning ourselves to images and instructions of someone else. When we say self-determined we mean created, defined, and controlled by ourselves.

Each reality that makes up our identity, be it material or social factors or our individual or collective aspects, can be characterized specifically and singularly.

In considering these four possible characteristics, the potential for even more combinations are possible by combining the two factors of our identity (individual and collective) with the four characteristics of our identity (true or false, self-determined or imposed). We can graph the possibilities in this manner:

KEY:

Material = M, Social = S, Individual = I, Collective = C, Imposed = IP, Self-Determined = SD, True = T, False = F

	T-IP	T-SD	F-IP	F-SD
I-M	I-M-T-IP	I-M-T-SD	I-M-F-IP	I-M-F-SD
I-S	I-S-T-IP	I-S-T-SD	I-S-F-IP	I-S-F-SD
C-M	C-M-T-IP	C-M-T-SD	C-M-F-IP	C-M-F-SD
C-S	C-S-T-IP	C-S-T-SD	C-S-F-IP	C-S-F-SD

So then determining one's identity is not a very simple task, it is quite complex to say the least! But, although it is complex, it is a most important process, for without a clear assessment of identity we cannot develop assertiveness and thus live purposeful and fruitful lives. To assert is to be clear on who we are (identity), what our self-defined long-range and short-range goals are (purpose) and how we plan to achieve our goals (direction). Without a true and self-determined identity, purpose, and direction we have nothing of our own to assert. At best, we can only put forward an imposed and false identity, purpose, and direction.

Thus, one of our goals, as Black Women (and as Black men) is to truthfully analyze ourselves and our conditions. As individuals, without truth as our foundation, we will not make honest assessments and criticisms for the transformation of ourselves and toward our self-development. We will not be willing to accept who we are and transform what is negative into something better and more beautiful. Without self-determination we may blindly follow the directions and decisions of others and be unable to be conscious of, committed to, and capable of controlling our individual selves and our own lives.

As a people and as social groups, without truth as our foundation, we will not be able to fight and win our battle for national liberation, and ultimately, participate in improving and beautifying the world and becoming fully developed human beings. Without self-determination as one of our guiding principles, whose interests might we serve? With self-determination we can be assured of controlling our lives and doing for ourselves as a people while simultaneously being willing to help others and accepting help from others.

DEVELOP A TRUE SELF-DETERMINED IDENTITY. Only through a process of study and struggle can we be assured of reaching higher levels of self-definition. By process we mean continuous (constant, unceasing) and directed (guided by beliefs and values) change. By study we mean gaining a clear and honest assessment of our social/ material, collective/individual realities. Informally, we can come together with other women and with Black Men to discuss the problems we face and truthfully recognize who we are, both individually and collectively, and what we can do to improve

our lives. Formally, we can form study groups, attend workshops and lectures, and collect statistics and other pertinent information which will aid in our study of our reality. We must also study not only our contemporary reality, but also our historical reality, using both to look toward the future and make projections about the kind of social and material reality we need to create.

By struggle we mean act upon the solutions and ideas we've gained, so that what is false and imposed in our identity can be transformed to true and self-determined aspects of our identity.

The questions we should ask ourselves are: Is this value, belief, or viewpoint consistent with reality and/or our aspirations? Is it true? Is my investigation, conclusion, and solution self-determined or imposed? This is key because for many of us our identity is not rooted in study and struggle, but in the socialization, we've received from our parents and from this capitalist, racist and sexist society we have been and are living in. Much of who we believe we are is false and/or imposed and only through a process of study and struggle will we gain a true and self-determined self-awareness.

To sum up, we have the capacity to transform ourselves. As we gain a better understanding of our many realities, we become more aware or conscious of who we are. This self-awareness is not static. In degree and sometimes in essence, we are constantly changing as we grow, develop, and live through life. This awareness of self is not absolute. We are learning to be conscious of our material social, individual, and collective realities each of which cannot be all true or all false, or all imposed or all self-determined. Nor can our identity be composed of only material, or only social or only individual, or only collective. It is a process of changing what is false to that which is true and determining this ourselves. We re-evaluate, re-define, and finetune, progressing closer to a true self-determined identity through study and struggle.

STEP TWO: IDENTIFY BARRIERS

We've divided the barriers to assertive behavior into four categories: (1) social standards and conditioning, (2) fears, (3) inadequacy and (4) irrational thinking and responses.

SOCIAL STANDARDS AND CONDITIONS. Some barriers to assertiveness are a matter of social condition. Male children are taught to speak up, to go out and fight for what they want. Female children are discouraged from such behavior. Men are taught to manage their lives while women are taught to accept whatever comes and make the best of it. Assertiveness is not a quality admired in women in this society.

For example, when we women state our needs, we are accused of "nagging." Our requests are belittled and given low priority. Many men evade the importance of the needs of we women by characterizing our needs as unimportant. This causes many of us to believe that we have little worth and that what we need has little value. Thus, in an effort to avoid being put down, we begin to depend on others to define and prescribe our needs and wants for us.

Also, when we set out to accomplish a short-range goal such as education or employment, we are asked a long list of questions whose answers must justify why we need to go to school or work. To avoid this "third degree" type questioning, we women sometimes connive, act helpless or tease and trick others into supporting us. Thus, in an effort to get what we need, we sometimes act dishonestly, and willfully live out lies.

Not only are we Women socially conditioned to deny or hide our true feelings and thoughts, but also society has conditioned men to believe that women always have ulterior motives and hidden agendas. An example of this particular layer of condition is the "pay back" syndrome, that is, "if I help you, what's in it for me?" For women, the "payback" can routinely go as far as sexual payment for needed support. Some women and men believe that there is no other way for women to get what they need and want except to barter with their bodies. When a woman asks a man for a ride because her car won't start or because of rain, oftentimes that man will assume "she means more than just a ride. This is a ploy to let me know she wants to get next to me."

These overlays of social conditioning strain our lives as women and unnecessarily and detrimentally separates us from our men as well as from other

women. Thanks to sexism, we Women have such barriers to assertively, and, if necessary, aggressively fight against.

Social standards for women are different. Women are not expected to be committed to their work and, if we are, something is wrong with us rather than the wrong resting in the society where the standards exist. Women must be better credentialed, that is, be outstanding (“a superwoman”) in her work, and in her own eyesight as well as the eyesight of others, in order to even consider or be considered as a possible candidate for a better job or a professional position. Sometimes women are even required to speak about their emotional, social, and sexual lives when applying for jobs.

This society is surprised to see such qualities as responsibility, efficiency, capability in women, yet less qualified men are promoted to executive levels. This society separates men and women and stratifies and exploits our labor to keep the system going.

Because of our social status as housekeepers, nurses, elementary school teachers, secretaries and social workers and other such “service” jobs, when women in this society are asked who we are we really say little about ourselves as persons, but speak of who we are in relationship to the people we care for and serve. We women are sensitive to everyone's needs but our own, are supportive of everyone else but ourselves. We, as Women, have been socialized to believe that it is negative to be proud of ourselves and our accomplishments. We are made to feel guilty about setting our own goals and working to attain those goals without first helping others., whether family or friends, to meet their goals.

Society also views women as inherently weak when we depend on others, but interdependence is socially beneficial and, if we look closer, we will see that men are just as dependent, if not more so , on others, yet society doesn't label men as weak because of their dependencies.

In this society, women are often viewed as being less than adults and as having emotional problems, yet society ignores obviously childlike behavior in many men who cannot wash and fold their own clothing, or cook, or clean up after themselves. Sadly, we Women feel guilty when we don't follow or fit into such sexist social standards as taking care of men!

Those who control this country are artisans at making truth into a lie, making what is humanly appropriate behavior for both men and women behavior that is appropriate only for men. Behavior such as asserting and standing up for our rights is applauded when men do it and often condemned when women do it. Also, sexist behavior is praise and inside appropriate and correct! Let us fight against such sexist beliefs, values, and standards. These are barriers which we must break through.

FEARS. Being Women and being Black in a racist and sexist class society is no joke. It reaps tensions and fears as we do our best to survive here. Without society on our side, and struggling to make change on our own, we often fear retaliation or the awful consequences of standing up for our rights. We Women know that we will be called “sapphires,” that we will be intimidated, that attempts will be made to manipulate us and that we will be rejected by many when we assert ourselves!

In the face of these real, although wrong, responses to our assertive behavior, we become nervous and anxious about attempting to do what is generally unknown to us. Anxiety and/or fear is a natural response to what is foreign or new and which requires us to take great risks in order to reach our goals. Although all human beings exhibit fear in various situations, when we Women do so, we are considered weak. Men who exhibit fear behavior in taking risks are considered not only weak but also feminine, as if weak and feminine are synonymous.

What we are really fearful of is the pain of failure. However, we will never be able to succeed in the long run without experiencing some short run failures. And, more importantly, learn the valuable lesson that failure is often the first step to success! We can overcome our fears and anxieties by supporting each other and reinforcing our struggles to achieve goals and develop ourselves as women.

INADEQUACY. Inadequacy is a feeling or inability to accomplish a given task. Women have been taught to feel inadequate about themselves even when they are capable of accomplishing a given task. Signs of inadequacy include qualifying our statements with phrases such as:

“I don’t know if I can help, but...”

“This may seem silly, but...”

“This is probably not right but...”

I’m not sure this is important, but...”

The key to eliminating feelings of inadequacy is gaining expertise and experiences in whatever sphere of work we are in and/or hope to be in. We are frustrated and are inadequate because we lack either the knowledge or the theory (expertise), or we lack the skills or the practice (experience) to effectively and efficiently create, produce, maintain and manage in whatever sphere of work or social activity in which we engage. Overcoming inadequacy involves gaining skills and knowledge, and also gaining experience.

IRRATIONAL THINKING AND/OR RESPONSES. In moving toward assertiveness, the final barrier to overcome is irrational responses and thinking. Irrational responses such as temper tantrums and hysteria are defense mechanisms and signs of assertive problems. Irrational responses may also be a result of holding in negative feelings and depending on tricks and silent communications to get messages across rather than with honesty. But ignoring bad feelings only result in inappropriate explosions or psychosomatic illness that only hurt ourselves. Don’t deny the feelings we have!

Other irrational responses which negatively express our feelings are forgetfulness, misunderstanding, procrastinations, chronic lateness, refusal to learn and nervous habits.

Irrational thinking affects our behavior and makes us fearful of the outcome of our assertiveness. Such thoughts as:

“If I disagree, I will lose my friends.”

“If I don’t do what people want, they won’t like me.”

“If I tell my husband I don’t want sex, he will leave me and never love me again.”

If our social relationships are such that these maneuvers are necessary to maintain them, then do we really want to be around such people? Let us begin to challenge our beliefs and take action against them based on our new beliefs and learn to live with the results.

STEP THREE: DEVELOP POLITICALLY AND TECHNICALLY

Political development for women begins with an understanding of how the forces of capitalism, racism and sexism triply oppress us, individually and collectively, as working-class Black women. To develop politically is to begin to define ourselves and self-determine our lives. How can we better control our lives? What must we do to transform our behavior and beliefs in order to reach our goals? What are our goals? In solving these questions we will grow politically, and thus can take steps to gain power and gain control over our lives.

Political development requires organizing skills so that we can become capable of sharing our beliefs with others in our community, and thus politicize our People to support our efforts in our fight against sexism and for our development as Black Women. Organizing skills are: (1) writing, including news reporting, articles, and analytical essays, (2) speaking, including formal speeches, workshops, television and radio programs, and community meetings. Prerequisites to these major skills are the ability to analyze a particular issue, to organize this analysis, and, finally, to teach, that is, to pass on this knowledge to our People in a usable form.

We Black Women must become active in improving our People's lives by struggle. It is with knowledge and skills that we will have the technical experience and expertise to accomplish tasks for our own defense and development.

We need to be trained in the technical skills related to our People's basic needs of food, clothing shelter, transportation and, also, those skills required for our future national needs of defense, education, government, and economy. We Women can and must take on this challenge so as to insure our full participation and involvement in our People's defense and development.

STEP FOUR: PRACTICE ASSERTIVENESS

The fourth and final way we develop assertiveness is through daily practice, being disciplined, working unceasingly to develop self. We must take the lead when we

can, whenever we are ready. In most cases, no one is going to ask us to lead a meeting organize a demonstration, speak on the dynamics of our ideology, write a historical or contemporary analysis of our struggle or create a relevant computer program in the field of telecommunications or in the fields of health, engineering, math or any other area of science.

There are few mechanisms to encourage, support or require we Women to take the lead. We must begin to assert ourselves by applying what we gain politically and technically. Once we are schooled in political thought and morals, we must daily study, promote, apply and be examples of our beliefs and values. Once we are schooled in technical knowledge and skills, we must be experts in our work responsibilities, that is be knowledgeable and skillful in the creation/production and maintenance/management of whatever task we take upon ourselves to accomplish.

In short, we practice assertiveness by being conscious of our identity, purpose and direction and by being capable of developing ourselves politically and technically, and by being committed to fighting against sexism and those beliefs that act as barriers to asserting ourselves.

Assert consciousness! Assert self and our beliefs and values. We assert self when we are self-aware and self-controlled. Use our beliefs and values as a guide for living. When faced with problems, we assert ourselves by analyzing the situation, applying solutions, and evaluating the results.

Assert capability! Assert the will and the ability to study and struggle in the realm of political organizing and in the realm of science and communications. We are assertive when we are willing to create the type of environment and make the type of social associations that will reinforce rather than tear down our full participation in improving both our own and our People's lives. We are assertive when we are able to create conditions for change, and ultimately, revolution.

Assert commitment! Assert what is right and necessary regardless of obstacles. As assertive Black Women we struggle to put our ideology into practice. Assertive Black Women believe in our People's potential and capacity to transform ourselves and our communities. To be assertive is to set new priorities, giving up comforts and

pleasure, if need be, to insure growth in our commitment to our own self development and the collective power of the masses of our People.

Reinforcement is extremely important and one major way we can get this kind of help and support is by forming groups informally and formal. This is one of the main reasons our organization exists. An organization helps us project the new image we have of ourselves and provides feedback and models to what we are trying to achieve individually and collectively. Feedback in the form of constructive criticism and positive suggestions helps each of us stay in touch with ourselves and our individual and collective goals. An organization provides us opportunities to experiment and to test our assertiveness, to learn from each other and our responses and finally to learn to keep on struggling.

This is crucial because we might expect our husband, friend, or lover to be our main source of support, but they sometimes tend to be the least likely to help us attain our new goals. It may be more difficult for those to whom we are close to accept this change as positive for they will also have to change in order to keep pace with us. However, as we practice assertiveness and believe in the strength of those close to us, these problems will correctly be dealt with in time.

SUMMARY

Assertiveness is the definitive and purposeful expression of who we are. We Black Women have the capability and potential to be what we need and want to be. We are capable because we are willing and able to develop ourselves. We have the potential because we are resourceful possessing the means to gain knowledge and skills to insure our full participation in our People's self-determination and self-reliance.

Sometimes this preprocess will be painful causing us to suffer; other times it will be enjoyable causing us to be satisfied with our successes and with ourselves, but this is the stuff of which life is made. Being assertive will not be easy, but we can accomplish higher levels of assertiveness by being systematic in our strategy and by getting reinforcement from an organization in which we are full members. We are not perfect and will make mistakes, but every mistake can be either a lesson or a letdown. It is

important that we learn from our mistakes and realize that, regardless of the odds we face, struggle will make us strong.

What we need is a saner society, we need to create a place where life can be lived fully, enjoyed, improved, and made ultimately much better. We need to free ourselves and our people from all our twisted anti-female and chauvinistic thoughts and actions.

What we need to do is encourage each other's growth, encourage each other to get together and speak out, to rush forward and take the lead on social and political issues, to form associations that will organize around our concerns.

Let us be confident and courageous as we assertively progress, blossom, and bloom, advancing closer to our full potential as Black Women!