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## ***Per Âa* Asa Hilliard: The Great House of Black Light for Educational Excellence**

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*This interpretive review draws on a number of Asa G. Hilliard's Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) writings to examine his conception of educational excellence in ancient Kemet and for African American education today. The review offers an interpretation of Hilliard's lifelong quest for excellence in education, which is especially revealed in his analysis of the educational implications of Black rulership of Egypt's 18th Dynasty, in the chapter entitled "Waset: The Eye of Ra and the Abode of Maat—The Pinnacle of Black Leadership in the Ancient World."*

**KEYWORDS:** Black education, cultural analysis, human development, psychology.

There is not enough space to give tribute to Asa Grant Hilliard III's career as a consultant to the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa, or as superintendent of schools in Monrovia, Liberia, or as department chair and dean of education at San Francisco State University, or as a board certified forensic examiner, or as the Fuller E. Calloway Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University, Atlanta, where he held joint appointments in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education. It is equally difficult to address his work as an internationally renowned and recognized Egyptologist. My intention is not to debate or validate Asa G. Hilliard's credentials and experience as an Egyptologist. What I wish to address in this article are Asa G. Hilliard's scholarship and lectures related to ancient Nile Valley civilizations as a resource for African American educational excellence. This review excavates his writings and lectures on Egyptian and Nile Valley civilizations to reveal the foundation, unfolding, and clarity of his thought regarding educational excellence for African American children.

I have titled this review of this selected body of his work "*Per Âa* Asa Hilliard: The Great House of Black Light for Educational Excellence." In the *medu netcher* (hieroglyphs), *Per Âa* means the "great house," that is, "palace" or "Pharaoh" (Faulkner, 1981; Gardiner, 1957). The term *Pharaoh*, in turn, meant the "sun or light of Kemet," which meant the "Black land" or the "land of the Black people" (Diop, 1990). Hence, one could interpret *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard as "Asa Hilliard, the Great House of Black Light" or "Asa Hilliard, the Great House of Light for Black

People.” In unpacking Asa’s scholarship on Egypt and the Nile Valley, I demonstrate that the light in *Per Âa* Asa’s quest is nothing less than a manifestation of excellence in education for African American children.

Informed by the wisdom of ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) teachings, philosophy, and cultural practice, this review discusses and offers an interpretation of a selection of Dr. Hilliard’s (hereafter, *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard’s) scholarship that illuminates his quest for educational excellence. This quest, which defined so much of his life and work, is especially revealed in these selected publications and two seminal lectures, one presented at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Hilliard, 2007b), in Chicago, and his final lecture, delivered during the 24th study tour of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilization (ASCAC), in Cairo, Egypt, in August 2007 (Hilliard, 2007a). As such, this article draws on these Kemetic writings:

- “Kemetic Concepts in Education—Nile Valley Civilizations” (Hilliard, 1984)
- “Pedagogy in Ancient Kemet” (Hilliard, 1986)
- “Waset: The Eye of Ra and the Abode of Maat—The Pinnacle of Black Leadership in the Ancient World” (Hilliard, 1997)
- “Kemetic (Egyptian) Historical Revision: Implications for Cross-Cultural Evaluation Research in Education” (Hilliard, 1989)
- “The Meaning of Kemet (Ancient Egyptian): History for Contemporary African American Experience” (Hilliard, 1992)
- “Bringing Maat, Destroying Isfet: The African and African American Diasporan Presence in the Study of Ancient KMT” (Hilliard, 1994)

I also discuss the significance of these published lectures:

- Shaping Research for Global African Educational Excellence: It’s Now or Never* (Hilliard, 2007b)
- From Sah, Spdt, Spd to the Drinking Gourd: ASCAC, KMT, and Pan-Africanism Not to Perish* (Hilliard, 2007a)

The latter was his final lecture, delivered during the ASCAC’s 24th annual Ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) Studies Conference in Cairo, Egypt, on August 7, 2007.

This review—like *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard’s scholarly legacy—draws from published scholarship that has been made available through the efforts of the African American scholarly community—efforts that have resulted in the recovery and restoration of the long tradition of scholarship often ignored by the academy. *Stolen Legacy*, by George G. M. James, is one such authoritative text. It was originally published by Philosophical Library in 1954 in New York, then recovered from near obscurity and republished by the San Francisco bookseller and publisher Julian Richardson in 1988. In the introduction to *Stolen Legacy*, *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard stated,

Mental bondage is invisible violence. Formal physical slavery has ended in the United States. Mental slavery continues to this present day. This slavery affected the minds of all people and, in one way, it is worse than physical

slavery alone. That is, the person who is in mental bondage will be “self contained.” Not only will that person fail to challenge beliefs and patterns of thought which control him, he will defend and protect those beliefs and patterns of thought virtually with his last dying effort. (p. 6)

He further noted that we must recall here the burning of the Egyptian Ethiopian Library of Alexandria, the Inquisition, and the many book burnings in history. What, he asked, was in the books that were burned? What were the secrets that are hidden? Does it matter, he asked, if we teach the following:

“Man, know thyself” was not original with Socrates but was common among Egyptian teachers.

Plato’s four cardinal virtues were copied from the Egyptian mysteries.

Grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, music, and astronomy were Egyptian “liberal arts” copied by Greeks.

Whole Greek faculties and student bodies moved to Egypt to be taught by Egyptians and to learn from their libraries.

Greek philosophers were not welcome at home.

Greeks began going to Egypt for education around 555 BC.

Some of Plato’s material comes from the 5,000-year-old *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

The 4,000-year-old Memphite theology is the source of much Greek thought.

Yes, it does matter and the matter is found in ancient Kemet and Nile Valley civilizations. The teaching of the true relationship of African genius to the historical development of Western civilization does matter because such insights give our students an appreciation and respect for the idea that what we hold to be great and important is the result of human interactions or exchange and the blending of the best creative ideas from different quarters of the human tapestry. Illuminating, examining, and critiquing the best ideas found in ancient Kemet and the Nile Valley clearly adds to the full texture and color of the tapestry of human culture and civilization.

### **Black Rulership and Educational Excellence: The Significance of Kemet**

In “Kemet Concepts in Education” *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard (1984) reviewed ancient education in Egypt under Black rule. He showed that the native African dynasties (1–12, 18, 25) were governed by a passion for education. Pointing to direct and indirect evidence, he demonstrated that Kemet high culture and development were always connected with an emphasis on education. In this work, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard helps us to understand his reason for looking at Kemet systems of education. He noted that

Kemet education is our best window on ancient African education continent-wide; Kemet education is the parent of “Western” education, and therefore it must be understood if ancient and modern Western education is to be understood; and Kemet education is a system that can and should provide guidance for the organization of the education of our people today.

Using the 18th Dynasty as a case study, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard (1997) noted that at Waset (later named *Thebes* by the Greeks and, even later, *Luxor* by the Arabs), the temple Ipet Isut (called *Karnak*) was the center of ancient Kemetic education. *Ipet Isut* meant the “most select of places or the holiest of places.” That alone reveals the importance that the ancient Africans gave to the place of learning.

Whereas many historians admit that these temples were centers of politics, religion, and education, one must be careful in assuming that independent and at-times competing interests were embedded in the activities of these select places. In citing Abdullah (1984), *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard (1989) noted that the Ipet Isut had at one time over 80,000 students. The faculty were called *Hersetha*, or “teachers of mysteries,” and were divided into departments: mystery teachers of heaven (astronomy and astrology), mystery teachers of all lands (geography), mystery teachers of depths (geology), mystery teachers of the secret word (philosophy and theology), and mystery teachers of Pharaoh and mystery teachers who examined words (law and communication).

In exploring Kemetic education, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard (1995) helps us to see that the purpose of education was not, then or now, just a system for acquiring knowledge. He argued that education then and education now should be seen as “a process of the transformation of the learner who progresses through successive strategies of rebirth to become more god like” (p. 158). The reading of the ancient texts, he asserted, shows that our ancestors had a preoccupation with the sacred and that education, as exemplified by the *Ntru* (divine principles) of Tehuti and Ma’at, was a process of igniting the divinity of humanity.

In contrast, as *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard pointed out, a people without meaning or with a false meaning are a disabled people. He further stated that the culturally disarmed cannot stand as peers in a culturally armed world. For him, the meaning and significance of Kemet was proven in its utility for our struggle to liberate the African mind and advance the worldwide development of African people. In his quest for the light of educational excellence, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard suggested that as the struggle continues, Kemet offers several clear uses for the cumulative and continued history and culture of our people. In his scholarship (Hilliard, 1992), he drew from the ancient wisdom of Kemet to offer the following utilities:

*The source of philosophy.* In the face of an integrated ancient philosophical/religious system, the parent of world systems, it would be foolish for its heirs to act in ignorance of it. There is no reason for heirs of African systems to be more impressed by the answers to questions given in other philosophical/religious systems than they are with their own. Ideas about world views (metaphysics), knowledge views (epistemology), and value views (axiology), have been fully developed by African ancestors.

*A foundation for group unity and identity.* The destruction of group unity and identity is a precondition for the enslavement of a people. Group cohesion is a prerequisite to effective action. Group cohesion is rooted on shared culture.

*A source of resistance to alien domination.* Cabral (1974) was astute in his recognition of the role of indigenous culture in the practice of freedom. He saw that only by the organized, systematic, and effective repression of a people’s culture could a foreign or alien power dominate a native or culturally distinct population. Conquerors are fully aware of the power of history and culture.

*A basis for independence.* Once freedom is won it must be sustained. A free person or group must have an independent conception of identity, purpose, and direction. The history and culture of African people provide the foundation for the construction of independent visions, no matter where the sons and daughters of Africa are.

*A basis for creativity.* The use of one's past is not a rejection of technological creativities. It may help to put technology into perspective and to shape it. To know one's past is not to live in the past or to be stymied in the present. The past contains the seeds for the future. (p. 20)

As he looked at ancient Kemetic cultural patterns in "Pedagogy in Ancient Kemet" (Hilliard, 1986), *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard refused to allow us to fail to see that not only was there cultural unity among diverse groups of African people, but that was also an essential unity within the culture that was reflected in the intimate and harmonious ties between and among the domains of education, politics, economy, religion, and so forth. What is unstated here is that African cultural unity is a resultant condition of education because each of the other domains is dependent on education. As both the antecedents and the consequences of education, the ancient Kemites observed universal movement, change, and life itself for thousands of years. Hilliard suggested that what seemed to have shaped their pedagogical method was the recognition that a grand design appeared to be evident throughout the universe, which enabled one to study the universe to understand the rest of human reality through astronomy. Whereas many historians have been astonished by the unparalleled building of great monuments, temples, tombs, and pyramids, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard raised the question "What kind of educational system or process allowed for the attainment not so much the level of technical development as the philosophical orientation or the uses of the technology?" (p. 139). Higher aims, embedded in a particular philosophical orientation, drove the educational process. The goals of a comprehensive educational system were as follows: unity of the person, unity of the tribe, and unity with nature; the development of social responsibility; the development of character; and the development of spiritual power.

*Per Áa* Asa Hilliard noted that the ancient Kemetic education system gave little thought to the "inept intellectual capacity" (p. 142) of the person. The entire living environment was organized, perceived, and constructed as a teaching environment. Everything was combined to convey values and divine character and to convey a special view of the world. Everything had multilevels of meaning. Teachers, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard pointed out, modeled the behavior that they expect the student to learn. This excavation requires us to parenthetically ask, how did the education of Black students move from becoming one with Ma'at and Tehuti to being academically inferior or driven only by closing the achievement gap and "leaving no child behind"?

In "Waset, The Eye of Ra and the Abode of Ma'at: The Pinnacle of Black Leadership in the Ancient World," *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard (1997) established with primary evidence the irrefutable Blackness of ancient Nile Valley civilizations. The photographs in Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the kinds of dramatic images that he used to make this point.

The essential importance of the Blackness of ancient Nile Valley Civilization is, however, found in the recognition that full and honest intellectual discourse



FIGURE 1. *Queen Tiye*  
Source. Carruthers and Harris (1997).



FIGURE 2. *Amenhotep, Son of Hapu*  
Source. Carruthers and Harris (1997).

is damaged and diminished under the hegemony of White supremacy and that the United States is still a nation infected by the poison of White supremacy. As such, racial domination in the sphere of education is definitive and often used to mask the denial of Black children's humanity. African American children in many schools are systemically defined and treated as a denigrated, unwelcomed racial group. The development and education of Black children become defined in political terms (*No Child Left Behind, at risk, school reform, desegregation, bussing, social justice, minimum standards, closing achievement gaps*) that serve to further marginalize Black children and not by what is natural and expected from the highest possibility of being human. The ideology of White supremacy has biased the world through a process termed the "Whitening of



history.” In this process, all human phenomena are filtered through the lens of Whiteness and/or the White criteria of human standardization. The proclivity, herein, is to see and claim all human achievement and accomplishment as being found only in the experience of White people or indirectly in relation to contact with White people.

Giving attention to the Blackness of the ancient dwellers of the Nile Valley is no minor point. By engaging primary documents, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* and his colleagues shifted and expanded the paradigm of human achievement. The ancient record is clear. Based on visits to Africa in the fifth century BC, Herodotus,<sup>1</sup> the so-called Father of History, gave an eyewitness account in which he described the Egyptians as being Black with wooly hair (Trumbull & McNamar, 2005). Gaston Maspero (1846–1916) noted that “by the almost unanimous testimony of ancient historians, [the Egyptians] belong to an African race” (Maspero, 1917, p. 15). As referenced in Diop (1991), Karl Richard Lepsius’s *Incomparable Survey of the Monumental Ruins in the Ethiopian Nile Valley in 1842–1844* notes explicitly that

the Black people of remote antiquity were the earliest of all civilized peoples and that the first civilized inhabitants of ancient Egypt were members of what is referred to as the Black race who entered the country as emigrants from Ethiopia. (pp. xix-xx)

In the introduction to *Civilization or Barbarism* (Diop, 1991), John Henrick Clark notes that the French writer Count C. F. Volney (1991), in his important work *The Ruins of Empires*, makes note that

it was, then, on the borders of the Upper Nile, among a Black race of men, that was organized the complicated system of worship of the stars, considered in relation to the productions of the earth and the labors of agriculture; and this first worship, characterized by their adoration under their own forms and national attributes, was a simple proceeding of the human mind. (p. x)

Many of the leading antiquarians of the time—as influenced by what classical authors such as Diodorus Siculus and Stephanus of Byzantium had to say on the matter—were exponents of the view that the ancient Ethiopians, the Black people of remote antiquity, were the earliest of all civilized peoples and that the first civilized inhabitants of ancient Kemet were members of what is referred to as the Black race, who entered the country as emigrants from Ethiopia. The importance of correctly portraying the image and identity of ancient dwellers of the Nile Valley fulfills a critical mandate of accuracy or near accuracy in recording and representing the historical record of the past for all humans. Unfortunately, in systems of inequality, exploitation, and domination, education is always designed to teach the oppressed feelings of inferiority, innate inadequacy, helplessness, awe of the dominant class, and acceptance of one’s place. This state of affairs has negative implications for all children, not just Black children. When other children learn to see and define Black children—and, thereby, all Black people—as racial objects and not as human beings, they simultaneously craft and define their own meaning as



racial, albeit superior, objects and so consequently limit and diminish their own capacity to reach their highest potential and possibility.

However, whereas honesty in history is important, finding and representing truth in the historical past has even greater importance for the human project of educating its youth. When done right, education is an ongoing process that encompasses teaching and learning skills and imparting information, attitudes, beliefs, good judgment, knowledge, understandings, and wisdom. One of its chief goals is the intergenerational transmission of the instruments and medium for sustaining and developing life across time, space, and place. In its intent, content, and consequences, education is the process whereby human communities reproduce and refine the best of themselves by guiding the student to mastery, perfectibility, and excellence. Hence, the fundamental purpose of education is socialization, whereby we give to the next generation the required competence, confidence, and consciousness to effectively contribute to the sovereignty, security, well-being, and welfare of themselves, their community, people, and humanity. In so doing, education should directly result in each generation's having an inextricable link to its total past and an unbreakable responsibility for our infinite and collective future. Black children and all children are equally crippled in the contemporary relations in their communities and the world.

The Whitening of ancient Kemet, as documented in textbooks and historical scholarship, disconnects Black children's links to their full and complete past (King, 1992; W. W. Nobles & Nobles, 2006). Knowing the past directly shapes and inspires a child's sense of the now and their responsibility for contributing to and shaping the future. Black children's knowing that ancient Kemet was a Black civilization translates directly to dreams and possibilities of greatness. White children's and other non-Black children's knowing that there were great Black civilizations and achievements equally translates to respectful relations with Black children and among themselves, as well as to their own dreams of possibility. Hence, all children benefit from an education that honestly talks about Black leadership in the ancient world.

*Per Áa* Asa Hilliard, however, goes even deeper than historical storytelling. Hilliard's suggestion that ancient Kemet studies be used as a resource and not simply a reference is consistent with the Africana studies paradigm and obedient to its disciplinary goal of providing a

depthful intellectual grasp and appreciation of the ancient, varied and instructive character of the African initiative and experience in the world and the essential relevance of African culture as a unique and valuable way of being human in the world. (Karenga, 2002, p. 31)

Hence, in writing about the primary kings, queens, and high priests of Waset, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard raised the unspoken question of who educated them. Starting in the First Golden Age (Old Kingdom, 2700–2160 BCE), he noted that Snefru, the First King of the Fourth Dynasty (2592–2568 BCE), sent 50 large ships in a fleet to Lebanon. Who taught the equivalent of navigation, marine sciences, shipbuilding, mapmaking, and navigation required for Snefru's aquatic achievement? Snefru's son Khufu was not only the builder of the Great Pyramid but also the builder of a 140-foot ship that is almost completely intact and on display today, more than four

millennia later. Who taught engineering construction that was so exact and precise that it would endure for more than 4,500 years? What kind of teaching is that? *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* further pointed out for our consideration that in the 12th Dynasty, the “White chapel” was built for Kheperkara Senswosret I at Waset on the site of the Ipet Isut temple. This White chapel, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* taught us, is the earliest surviving building of the greatest university in the ancient world. The pinnacle of Black leadership was always tied to excellence in education.

In the New Kingdom, the high priest at Waset was Amenhotep, son of Hapu. *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* related that Amenhotep was believed to be the architect who established the canon for building the great University of Ipet Isut; however, while doing so, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* also directed our attention to the foundational role of education in ancient Kemet. Amenhotep gained the king’s attention because of his exceptional knowledge of the divine words. Again the rhetorical questions hidden in *Per Âa Asa Hilliard*’s discussion are as follows: Who was Amenhotep’s teacher? What was his course of study? For what purpose was he educated? What was the educational methodology that created or inspired his exceptional genius?

*Per Âa Asa Hilliard* ended this chronicle of ancient Black leadership with an astute observation. He noted that Waset was called the “eye of Ra” and the “abode of Ma’at.” It was a special place. It was the home of the most powerful rulers during two golden ages of Kemetite history. These rulers were indigenous African people. These Black men and women were world leaders at a time when the head of state was regarded as being representative of the one god on earth at the city that was the very eye of Ra. All of this was determined by Kemetite education, which meant that god’s law ought to be manifested in the lives of the people.

*Per Âa Asa Hilliard*’s contributions to our understanding of the enormous importance of ancient Kemetite education for African American education extends as far back as the articles and book chapters that he published decades ago. In a seminal lecture that he delivered in 2007, the continuing relevance of his understanding of African foundations of educational excellence is illuminating, as discussed in the following section.

### **Reframing the Research**

*Per Âa Asa Hilliard* presented the William Edward Burghardt DuBois Distinguished Lecture at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, in Chicago. He entitled this lecture “Shaping Research for Global African Educational Excellence: It’s Now or Never” (Hilliard, 2007b). In it, he astutely noted,

Our acute problem is this. How do we gain sufficient influence and leverage to change the course for our children? How can research and evaluation be used to change our trajectory, reframe the problem, and guide us to valid solutions? At present, I do not hear anyone who has expectations or plans to raise achievement, and certainly to raise our children’s achievement to the level of EXCELLENCE.

In this lecture, he also discussed the question of hegemony in the face of African educational excellence traditions, savage inequalities, and educational research in the quest for current African educational excellence. He pointed out that the

problem of hegemony was in fact White control of African education and the marginalization of African community leadership. The “master’s” methods, tools, and theories, he chided, require critique and change. Black educational researchers are encapsulated in language and paradigms that falsely appear to contain teacher and school creativity. Our problem definition and associated remedial approaches must, he suggested, be reframed.

As the issue of educational excellence has unfolded for *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard by way of, in part, his Kemet studies, he gave no quarter to any of the educational reform experiments that have targeted African American children. He noted that standardized minimum competency programs for the poor, for example, represent the new face of segregation/apartheid. They have become our “holy water.” With regard to the No Child Left Behind legislation, he noted that “the single most worrisome change for the African community and its children is the ‘loss’ of our community’s influence over the education and socialization of our children” (Hilliard, 2007b). This loss is not regained by drinking the holy water of any educational programming not centered on beneficial outcomes for African American children. He forcefully pointed out that these experiments are not delivering teaching power: They contain both teachers and pupils, and they do not lead to educational excellence.

In concluding his thoughts about global research for African American educational excellence, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard reminds us that research is a tool that we ought to possess, rather than the other way around. In this regard, *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard’s work challenges us to see that if the conventional paradigms, methodologies, and theoretical constructs associated with traditional educational research are not continuously critiqued and assessed regarding their validity, value, and appropriateness for exploring and/or testing the reality being examined, then the tool itself may drive and determine the insights and understandings provided by the research. Our failing to recognize this dilemma means that the research tool determines, rather than illuminates and explains, the issues under investigation; ergo, the research tool possesses (controls) the researcher, as opposed to the researcher’s possessing (controlling) the tool. The theoretical and empirical problematics associated with the long history of deficit-driven research, as grounded in assumptions of race-based inferiority, are testimony to the limitations found in educational and psychological research. *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard strongly questioned that if research is to play a role at all, it is time for us to take a different path and to strive for much higher standards. A higher standard requires the inclusion of varied and different epistemes that inform the praxis of educational research. For *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard, African American educational research directly benefits from the inclusion of African deep thought and epistemological constructions. Not only does such inclusion allow for a new and different interrogation, it invites the researcher to establish new paradigms, explore exciting and varied questions, and examine radically different theoretical constructs and programmatic interventions.

*Per Áa* Asa Hilliard asserted that as Africans, we must have a special mission, a reframing mission. We must have a mission to assume greater responsibility and control over our children’s socialization and to push for education for critical consciousness and educational goals far beyond passing state tests and getting a job: “It is time to take charge of our tools, our problem definitions, our definition of

legitimate education, our priorities, and to change directions. It is time to reach for excellence” (Hilliard, 2007b).

### **Alignment With Excellence: *Per Âa Asa Hilliard’s* Inspiration and Legacy**

What is clear to me is that in being informed by the wisdom teachings of the ancients, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* was able to see that the big idea in the adage “As above, so below” was the rule of alignment. By researching Kemetic astronomy, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* saw as a directive from heaven, alignment with excellence—not minimal competency nor a closing of the achievement gap. It is this alignment with excellence that speaks to the key for achieving educational excellence with African American children. It is also what helped to drive the Nsaka Sunsum pedagogy and process for achieving educational excellence with African American children. From 1993 until 2005, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* served as the chief consultant/collaborator and keynote presenter in the Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement’s summer teacher training institutes, where we formulated the construction of the Nsaka Sunsum (Touching the Spirit).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the Nsaka Sunsum educational pedagogy and process for educational excellence with African American children (W. W. Nobles, 1999) is based in part on applying specific cultural ideas and techniques designed to establish a teaching and learning environment wherein a pedagogical process is created to help the teacher to connect deeply with the spirit (essence) of the student. The aim is to animate, arouse, affect and/or influence the student’s exalted feelings, thoughts, or actions in the service of learning.

The Nsaka Sunsum educational pedagogy and process views teaching and learning as a divine dance between the life purpose and mission of both the teacher and the student. The belief is that each of us comes from Heaven to learn a set of lessons that are required for us to become better human beings and that each of us comes from Heaven with a set of gifts to be given to the world to make living better for us all. The lessons to be learned as life’s purpose are expressions of wisdom, and the gifts to be given as life’s mission are expressions of love. For both the student and the teacher, every teaching moment is an opportunity to learn a lesson or to give a gift.

The language associated with the tested process, intent, and method of the Nsaka Sunsum educational pedagogy and process are as follows:

- the four *Ms* of intent—mastery, majesty, memory, and meaning;
- the five *Rs* of method—relationship(s), ritual, recitation, repetition, and rhythm;
- and the six supportive practices—igniting the inner genius, divine dancing, learning gumbo, expressive personhood, rhythmic reinforcement, and sensory (auditory) learning enhancement.

The proposition is straightforward. If we understand the pervasive influence and power of spirit in human life, then it becomes clear and evident why touching the spirit must be the starting point for all learning, as well as the corrective for all educational underachievement and the impetus for learning acceleration and teacher professional development. With the Nsaka Sunsum process, one is required to

develop teaching strategies and practices that are consciously designed to touch the spirit and, as the ancient Kemites believed, ignite the divinity in the student.

If we were to reframe education as Asa suggested, then we would see all education, including the Nsaka Sunsum, as a series of alignments ultimately leading to an alignment with excellence and human perfectibility. As a sacred alignment, the teaching and learning process would align love, culture, and socialization in a package called *education*. Love—that most basic and undeniable desire for one's spirit (teacher) to connect, merge, extend, and expand into a greater (learning) oneness with another spirit (student)—must be aligned with culture, that vast structure of behaviors, ideas, attitudes, values, habits, beliefs, customs, language, rituals, ceremonies, and practices peculiar to a group of people that provide them with a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality. In turn, culture is aligned with socialization wherein the human family formally and informally reproduces and refines the best of what it means to be human.

For African American children, alignment with excellence must honor their human beingness and recognize that their human essence, substance, and nature are an attribute of the divine. It would build on the fact that at the most fundamental level, African American children are integral and essential parts of the whole body of African people. The alignment process would recognize that African American children belong to families, communities, and people who have a tradition of educational excellence. Educational alignment for African American children would be driven by the belief that as a divine dance, teaching and learning are the continuous and constant movement toward achievement and realization of higher levels of potential.

African American education—and education for all children—should be constructed so that their process, pedagogy, and product are all aligned with the goal of achieving excellence in teaching and learning. As an educational process, alignment with excellence would simply be driven by inspiration, not manipulation and achievement tests. Both the content and the intent of the educational process (W. W. Nobles, 1990) would be designed to reproduce and refine the best of what it means to be human. The ultimate outcome of an alignment with the excellent educational process would be students who have an authentic sense of personhood, an affirmed sense of purpose, and an assured sense of power.

More than 35 years ago, E. Franklin Frazier (1973) identified—as the “failure of the Negro intellectual” (p. 60)—the inability to study the problems of “Negro” life in America in a manner that would place the fate of the “Negro” in the broad framework of man's experience in this world. The “Negro scholar,” he concluded, was virtually useless in terms of providing theoretical guidance in overcoming White supremacy. Frazier believed that the sterility and irrelevance of Black intellectual activity were due to the fact that the work of the Black intellectual demonstrated that Black intellectuals had not reflected upon the “fundamental problems of human knowledge and the meaning of human existence.”

Although this may have been the state of our intellectual tradition 30 years ago, it is not our reality now. *Per Áa* Asa Hilliard is joined by a whole army of African scholars who in thinking deeply about the question of African humanity, philosophy, science, traditions, and culture, have adopted a multidisciplinary approach and a multidimensional perspective for the study and praxis of human problematics (Abimbola, 1976; Abraham, 1970; Armah,

1973; Ba Amadou, 1981; Chinweizu, 1978; Diop, 1959, 1974, 1991; Nkrumah, 1964; Obenga, 1992; Opoku, 1978); and African American scholars (Adams, 1979; Akbar, 1994; Ani, 1991; Ankh, 1995; Asante, 1990; Ben-Jochanan, 1971; Carruthers, 1999, 1995; Clarke, 1986; Kambon, 1992; Karenga, 1984, 1990; Mazama, 2001; Myers, 1988; V. L. Nobles, 1996; W. W. Nobles, 1972, 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 2006; Sizemore, 1990; Spight, 1977; T'Shaka, 1995; Van Sertima, 1985, 1989; Welsh-Asante, 1993; Wilson, 1993). It is only when we first think deeply about what it means to be a human being—and subsequently how that meaning shapes our responses and reactions to the problematics of education/socialization and conditions of living—will we learn or know anything of value.

It is in the tradition of thinking deeply about what it means to be fully human and African that I propose that we find the true meaning of *Per Âa Asa Hilliard's* scholarship. Ultimately, the fundamental utility of *Per Âa Asa Hilliard's* Kemetec studies can be found in the recognition that educational researchers should be equally concerned with the conditions and constraints that inhibit and/or advance the achievement of nothing less than educational excellence. The strongest and clearest implication of *Per Âa Asa Hilliard's* Kemetec studies would be that educational research that is driven by alignment with excellence and the socialization of unique and valuable human beings would at minimum refocus research questions on issues of competent versus incompetent teaching, culturally congruent versus culturally alienating learning environments, inspirational versus manipulative pedagogies, student capacity for unlimited possibility versus minimal competency, appropriate versus inappropriate funding expenditures, education for labor force needs versus education for human perfection needs, and so on. From his Kemetec studies, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard's* major concern was the question of educational alignment with excellence and not the goal of closing the racial academic achievement gap or any other educational reforms not grounded in the goal of educational excellence for African American children.

### Concluding Personal Reflection

If I may take a personal privilege, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* and I went beyond being friends and colleagues a long time ago: We served together on many campaigns of intellectual discourse and struggled for achieving educational excellence with Black children and the liberation of the minds of African people. We were business partners in the Urban Institute, along with his brother Thom Hilliard, Pat Butler, and Bill Hayes. We jointly provided technical assistance in the early formation of the Fanon Center, at the University of California, Los Angeles. And he wrote the introduction to my text (*Seeking the Sakhû*; W. W. Nobles, 2006), and I wrote the introduction to his (*SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind*; Hilliard, 1998).

For me, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* was more than a scholar, more than the perennial cornerstone resident scholar for my annual teacher in-service summer training institute (Center for the Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement), more than an intellectual, more than a psychologist, more than an educator, more than a researcher, and more than a best friend. Those roles and relations are far too limiting. Long ago the *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* family and mine became one family. *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* and I became brothers in the deepest and most profound sense of that sacred blood and spirit bond. Our spirits recognized almost immediately



that we were connected in ancestral blood and spirit. Our intellect, sensitivities, and commitment to the liberation of the African mind and worldwide development of African people are indelibly inscribed in Heaven, and our intertwining paths and purpose were clearly to be (and help others be) African.

I had the special privilege of being with *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard on his first (1978) and last (2007) visits to the Black Land (KMT, also known as Egypt). Although difficult sometimes to understand, many traditional African beliefs assert that we actually choose when we will transition from the realm of the yet-to-be born to the realm of the living and from the realm of the living to the realm of the afterlife. For example, the Yoruba traditionally believe that before coming to Earth from Heaven, we choose our “head” (destiny and purpose) and agree to the timing of both our coming (birth) and returning (death). In effect, we choose when we will be born and when we will die.

At the beginning of the chapter “Waset, the Eye of Ra and the Abode of Ma’at: The Pinnacle of Black Leadership in the Ancient World,” *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard quotes a 19th-Dynasty papyrus reprinted by Moret (1927/2001) in *The Nile and Egyptian Civilizations*:

Happy is he who comes to die at Thebes (Waset), the Abode of Justice (Maat), the place of silence. . . . Evil-doers come not here into the place of Justice (Maat). . . . Happiness to him who comes to die here! He will be a divine soul. (Hilliard, 1997, p. 127)

Almost prophetic, *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard went home to Waset to die (on August 13, 2007) while attending the 24th international conference of the ASCAC.<sup>3</sup> I use this statement to bring forward *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard’s deep insight for Kemet in his last public lecture and to make explicit what I believe to be the lesson learned for *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard, the Great House of Black Light.

*Per Âa* Asa Hilliard’s last public lecture was entitled “From Sah, Spdt, Spd to the Drinking Gourd: ASCAC, KMT and Pan-Africanism Not to Perish.” Present at this lecture were over 400 educators, the governor of Aswan, Nubian community leaders, and guests of the association’s 24th Ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) Studies Conference. Part of *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard’s genius was his ability to help the rest of us see the simplicity in extremely complex phenomena. In speaking to his ASCAC family, he talked about the sacred meaning of astronomy in ancient KMT and how profoundly scientific was the mind of Africa. In this discussion, *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard pointed out that in living life, the ancient Kemites continually addressed the big question “What is life itself about?” The creating and building of monuments, art, medicine, mummification, literature, and so on, he suggested, all represented the highest levels of scientific thought and methodology. These achievements gave answers to the big question.

The answer to “What is life itself about?” was “to be everlasting.” Through the filter of astronomy, *Per Âa* Asa Hilliard used the Kemetic adage “As above, so below” to demonstrate what life itself was about. In pointing to the Orion nebula, he helped us to see that the three stars in Orion’s belt (“as above”) were reflected in the building of the three great pyramids (“so below”) at Giza. He noted that the Milky Way, in the sky (“as above”), was seen as a representation of the Nile River, on the ground (“so below”). In unpacking Kemetic astronomy, he further noted that



at the time of the vernal equinox, the sign of Leo appears in the sky (“as above”) and the Sphinx (Leo) on the ground (“so below”) looks up at itself. Finally, in noting that some scholars said that the ancients were trying to live forever, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* said that we should let the ancestors speak. He noted that our ancestors observed that the soul is in Heaven (“as above”) and that the body is in Earth (“so below”). He concluded that just as “As above, so below” really signified everlasting life, so too must ASCAC, KMT, and Pan-Africanism not perish. In a very special way, *Per Âa Asa Hilliard’s* last public lecture can be read as revealing his own everlasting life.

The night before *Per Âa Asa Hilliard* passed, I gave a talk entitled “Seeking the Sakhu: A Brief Conversation on the Transmission of Divine Essence.” In it, I attempted to discuss what I believe to be some of the core ideas found in African deep thought emanating from African (Nile Valley) classical civilizations. In addressing the question regarding the transmission of divine essence, I spoke about the concept of everlasting life, the charge to build for eternity and living life to the fullest, the deeper meaning of the *medu nefer* (good speech), the quest for joy and beauty, and what is required to speak Ma’at and do Ma’at. What I did not know (but what my spirit did know) was that my speech provided instructions for me to be able to handle *Per Âa Asa Hilliard’s* passing and an outline for my tribute to his life.

### ***Dd Asa Irt Asa: Speak Asa, Do Asa***

Upon deeper reflection, I realize that Asa’s life should be thought of as text, perhaps even sacred text. As a gifted, valuable, and unique human being, Asa lived life to the fullest. He shared fully and loved completely. He especially loved to teach and to eat. I remember once, my wife and I were visiting Atlanta, and after a lecture, Asa invited us to go with him to have dinner at a raw/live-food restaurant. My wife is a vegan, and Asa thought that he would impress her with his newly found commitment to eating right and more healthy. I only eat vegetarian chickens so although I went along solely as an act of love, I kept telling Asa not to encourage these strange and exotic culinary experiments. Asa nevertheless gathered us up and was speeding (I mean, really speeding) in his car somewhere across outer Atlanta. I remember thinking to myself, why was Asa racing to get to this place? Either eating raw food was extremely delightful, or the food was very cheap, or the restaurant was about to close. Once there, Asa took special pride in showing us the many different kinds of dishes of raw grains, beans, legumes, teas, and juices that we could pile onto our plates and pay for by weight. Asa and Vera were in what appeared to be anti-carnivore Heaven.

Asa laughed and joked and smacked his lips as he devoured this cache of raw delights. I simply enjoyed the moment. Abandoning fried chicken is tantamount to sacrilege for me. The next time I saw Asa, we went to a Bar-B-Que joint, and Asa swore me to an oath not to tell Patsy Jo, his wife, what he was devouring. We laughed, joked, and discussed loving our wives while Asa “did not” eat Bar-B-Que chicken and “did not” eat Bar-B-Que beef and “did not” eat Bar-B-Que goat, and I, in telling this story, “did not” break my word not to tell Patsy Jo what Asa was eating while smacking his lips. Asa lived life to the fullest.

Traditional African wisdom teaches us that when an elder dies, it is like a library burning down. Asa was our library, and our library card was simply an e-mail

address. Not a single day would go by that I and hundreds of other people would receive one or more FYI articles, newspaper clips, student theses, critical essays, personal commentaries, and discussions regarding life, culture, education, and political affairs somewhere in the African world. In fact, each of these communiqués contained critical ideas and essential thoughts needed to evaluate, reevaluate, correct, rescue, and reconstruct an African reality worthy of living. In fact, the ideas and information that Asa constantly e-mailed to all of us were or should be thought of as tools for building for eternity. Asa's knowing and knowable spirit knew, I believe, that sound and profound ideas are the substance of any behavior that is everlasting—ergo, needed to build for eternity.

The guidance and direction that Asa gave to his students and junior colleagues, as well as the model of intellectual excellence he shared with the rest of us, exemplify *medu nefer*. If speech is the precursor to the translation of thought into practice and if good speech is what represents the transmission of thought beneficial to human well-being and development, then Asa's work, characterized by humility, courage, and excellence, was a scholar's/warrior's example of good speech.

The evidence of joy and beauty is so prevalent in the inscriptions and on the monuments in ancient KMT that the constant quest for them goes almost unnoticed. Asa and I shared granddaddy tales, compared notes, and expressed our mutual happiness in finding great joy in the love and energy of our grandchildren. Our wives share the same birthday, August 20, and when I reflect back on the many times we talked about these two Leo women who taught us how to love and who honored us with beautiful and intelligent children and how they both called us "hard-headed" yet insisted on ruling, running us in such a way that even though our misguided manliness tried to resist, our divine intelligence compelled us to simply and humbly obey. Asa's life as husband, father, son, brother, nephew, grandfather (Popeye), as well as teacher, *Jegna*,<sup>4</sup> friend, and colleague was characterized by a quest for joy and beauty that was so extraordinarily normal and ordinary that it was completely invisible. It was just Asa.

Finally, as testamentary to Asa's living, I must note that the traditional Bantu-Kongo meaning of "being human" states that to be a person (human) is to be a living (Black) sun, possessing a knowing and knowable spirit (energy) that recognizes that we live and move within, and are inseparable from, the ocean of waves and radiations of spirit, having an enduring relationship with the total perceptible and ponderable universe. To be wonderfully human is to be a threefold-unfolding radiating spirit dwelling in the realms of yet to live, living, and afterliving. In being human, we live and move (radiate) as spirit, continually and constantly affirming our own humanity by recognizing and respecting the humanity of others and on that bases establishing humane relations with other humans and the world. Being human and living in this way is the achievement of everlasting life. The wisdom traditions of Africa suggest to me that Asa, as divine spirit, existed in the realm of the yet-to-be born; he transitioned to the realm of the living and is now transitioning into the realm of the afterlife. In completing this never-ending spiraling cycle, Asa's radiating threefold unfolding spirit illustrates the idea of the transmission of divine essence.

Thus, as sacred text, Asa's life shows us all the importance of illuminating the spirit, devoting ourselves to bringing forth our genius and humanity, and giving our best to the liberation of the African mind and the worldwide development of African

people. Great people are talked about and often quoted (sometimes misquoted), and many different forces will claim ownership of their legacy by interpretation and/or usurpation. Many different factions will claim ownership of the teachings and legacy of Asa Grant Hilliard III. Many will say, “Asa said this” or “Asa said that” or “Asa believed in this” or “Asa would not support that.” To only quote Asa or debate about what he stood for would, I believe, fail to fully honor his life.

In a 9th or 10th Dynasty at Sakkarah in the Old Kingdom, there is a relief that depicts several lector priests reciting the many Sakhus designed to transform the deceased person into a glorious spirit, a more powerful spirit. The chant is translated as *irt hr skh*, performing the Sakhu or doing the ritual of the Sakhu. Asa performed life as it should be done. In memory of Asa Grant Hilliard III, we could make his name a title. To honor him, we cannot just say what he said: We should do what he did; we should live as he lived; and we should be as he chose to be. We must “do Asa, be Asa.” We could strive to perform Asa as it should be done. We could declare that achieving excellence is “being Asa.” We can honor excellence in our students by referring to their good work as “doing Asa.” In seeking excellence in our own thought and action, we could declare that we are “seeking Asa.” We can refer to seeking or achieving excellence as “performing Asa.” To entitle seeking excellence as “doing Asa” would be a fitting tribute to the life of my brother, Asa Grant Hilliard III. Future educators, scholars, researchers, and students could *dd Asa, irt Asa*, “speak Asa, do Asa,” or *irt hr Asa*, “performing Asa as it should be done.”

Happy is he who comes to die at Thebes (Waset), the Abode of Justice (Maat), the place of silence. . . . Evil-doers come not here into the place of Justice (Maat). . . . Happiness to him who comes to die here! He will be a divine soul.

Asa Grant Hilliard III, Nana Baffour Amankwatia II, Pharaoh, *Per Âa*, our great house of Black light for educational excellence, has received happiness. He is true of voice and a divine soul for eternity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>It should also be noted that at the time of Herodotus’s visit to Egypt and other parts of Africa (between 480 BC and 425 BC) Egypt’s golden age was over: Egypt had suffered from several invasions—mainly, the Kushite invasions, starting in 751 BC, and the invasions of the Assyrians from Western Asia (now called the Middle East), starting in 671 BC. If Egypt, after years of invasions by other people and nations was a distinct Black African nation at the time of Herodotus, shouldn’t one at least assume that it was more so (Black) before these invasions occurred?

<sup>2</sup>*Nsaka Sunsum* is a constructed term representing or designed to label an African-centered educational pedagogy driven by touching the spirit of every aspect of the teaching and learning enterprise. It is derived from two African terms found in the Twi language of Ghana. The word *sunsum* represents the activating principle in the person. It is one’s spirit. It is the unperceivable, invisible, mystical power of the person. It is the divinity in people. The word *nsaka* means “to touch, feel, or make contact” or “to connect deeply with someone or something.” Hence, *Nsaka Sunsum* is offered as representing the ability in education to connect deeply with the essence (spirit) of someone to animate, arouse, affect, and/or influence in one an exalted feeling, thought, or action.

<sup>3</sup>The Association for the Study of Classical African Civilization was founded on February 26, 1984, by six prominent and internationally recognized African American scholars. The founding members of the organization included Asa G. Hilliard III, along with John Henrik Clarke, Yosef ben-Jochannan, Jacob H. Carruthers, Leonard Jeffries, and Maulana Karenga. With the mission to promote the study of African civilizations for the development of an African worldview, the association has provided a unique scholarly and layperson's instrument and opportunity for intellectual discourse regarding African contributions to human civilization, which is contributing to the rescue, reconstruction, and restoration of African history and culture. Until his mortal transition, Dr. Hilliard served as first vice president of the association. The current president is Nzinga Heru.

<sup>4</sup>*Jegna* (*Jegnoch*, plural form) is an Ethiopian term representing those special people who are tested in struggle or battle; who demonstrate extraordinary and unusual fearlessness; who show determination and courage in protecting their people, land, and culture; who show diligence and dedication to their people; who produce exceptional, high-quality work; and who dedicate themselves to the protection, defense, nurturance, and development of their young by advancing their people, place, and culture. A *Jegna* is one whose central focus is the culture and character of one's people. Language reflects and represents a people's culture. When African people utilize non-African concepts (i.e., Greek, Roman, Anglo Saxon, etc.), they unknowingly distort the phenomena associated with the reality identified by the concept. Africans should at every possibility use African concepts to describe and give meaning to African phenomena. In this sense, the African term *Jegna* best describes the relationship that Asa Hilliard had with his students and colleagues, rather than the traditional Greek label *mentor* (see W. W. Nobles, 2002).

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