



**ABDIAS NASCIMENTO AT PALMARES:
RESISTANCE, AFFIRMATION AND SELF-PRODUCED POSSIBILITY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011) a towering, tested and respected presence in the Afro-Brazilian liberation and pan-African movements made transition last Monday, May 23 at the age of 97, weighing heavy in the scales of African and human history, for the awesome legacy he left is extensive and enduring. Surely, the verse in the *Odu Ifa* that says, “May the battles we wage always add to our honor” applies to his life of righteous struggle for African people and in the interest and advancement of human good. Thus, as it is written in the *Husia* “he shall be counted among the ancestors, his name shall endure as a monument and what he has done on earth shall never perish or pass away.”

Nascimento was an Imhotepian man—an artist, author and activist intellectual, a professor, playwright, poet, painter, political legislator and leader, a historian and a constant soldier and defender of the rights of African people. Realizing the radical and revolutionary role, art could play in the struggle for the liberation of Afro-Brazilians, he founded the Black Experimental Theatre in 1944 in Rio de Janeiro, using it to present and expand knowledge of African values, to create dignity-affirming images of African people and advance the struggle. Forced into exile by the military regime in 1968, he carried the voice and struggle of his people around the world, teaching in various U.S. universities and in Nigeria and speaking at various international forums of African peoples. Even in exile, he stayed in touch with the Black Movement and helped found the Democratic Labor Party of Brazil, inserting the struggle against racism in its platform.

Tiamoyo and I met Abdias Nascimento and his wife and co-worker, Elisa Larkin Nascimento, at FESTAC 77, the Second Festival of Black & African Arts and Culture, Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. And the last

time we met was in 2008 at a Kwanzaa lecture I gave in Buffalo, New York, where he had founded the chair of African Cultures in the New World in the Center of Puerto Rican Studies in 1971 at the University of Buffalo. He had come to FESTAC to bring greetings of solidarity and struggle in the name and voice of the Afro-Brazilian people. In exile, and opposed by the official Brazilian representative at the Conference, he was denied the opportunity to present. As chair of the African American delegation to the FESTAC Colloquium, I organized a radical pan-African caucus composed of African Americans, Australian Aborigines, Caribbeans in Europe, Cubans, Ethiopians and Somali. And thru our unity with other delegates and patient and persistent negotiations, we were able to obtain a plenary space for Abdias to deliver his message of the history and hope of his people, the hype, hypocrisy and criminal nature of Brazil’s so-called “racial democracy” and his and his people’s steadfast commitment to the struggle for liberation.

Like all African nationalists and pan-Africanists, Nascimento was concerned with rescuing African memory from the “falsities, distortions and negations that Europe for so long have been weaving around Africa.” Thus, he posed as central the *sankofa* project of rescuing and reconstructing our memory. For he says, “to rescue our memory means to rescue ourselves from oblivion, from the traps of nothingness and negation; to reaffirm our active presence in Pan-African history and in universal human reality.”

Nascimento defined his philosophical framework as *Quilombismo*, “a unique human, ethnic and cultural affirmation, at once integrating a practice of liberation and assuming command of their own history” by Afro-

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Brazilians. The word is taken from *quilombo*, which were historical communities of *resistance* and *affirmation* formed by self-freeing formerly enslaved Africans, who bonded together to secure and defend their freedom, struggled to free others and lived lives of shared work and wealth. The largest of these was the historic free Republic of Palmares (1595-1695) whose last leader was named Zumbi. Nascimento posed him and Palmares as a model to emulate and a ground of tradition on which we must stand, i.e., *a tradition of resistance, affirmation and self-produced possibility*. In the spirit of pan-Africanism, Nascimento points to various other forms of African communities of resistance, affirmation and self-produced possibility throughout the Americas. He states that “in Mexico, these societies were called *cimarrones*; in Venezuela *cumbres*; in Cuba and Columbia, *palembes*; in Jamaica and the United States, *maroon* societies.”

He notes that Quilombismo, as a nationalist movement, is at the same time pan-Africanist, internationalist and anti-imperialist. “Quilombismo, as a nationalist movement teaches us that every people’s struggle for liberation must be rooted in their own cultural identity and historical experience.” As a pan-Africanist initiative, it embraces common ground and engages in common struggles with other African people. And “as an anti-imperialist struggle, it articulates itself with pan-Africanism and sustains a radical solidarity with all peoples of the world who struggle against exploitation, oppression, poverty, as well as inequalities motivated by race, color, religion or ideology.”

Nascimento urged his people to value and build on their own particular history and experience. But he realized also the recapturing of their memory and the rich legacy it reveals “is only a part and particle in the gigantic project of reconstruction of a larger past to

which all Afro-Brazilians are connected.” And he stresses the responsibility of learning this legacy and honoring it that this recapturing requires. Indeed, he says, to Afro-Brazilians “to redeem this past is to have a consequent responsibility in the destinies and futures of the African nation worldwide, still preserving our quality as edifiers and genuine citizens of Brazil.”

Quilombismo, in its pan-African thrust, calls for and sets forth those elements essential to pan-African revolution: “the promotion of the liberation of the human personality;” the telling and demonstrating to the people “that they are capable of transforming the circumstances in which they live; that from being a led people, they may lead themselves; that they maintain sovereignty over their own history; that they must liberate themselves from that in the past which had an impact on them which was foreign to them; (and) that they must forcefully reject all forms of oppression and exploitation.”

Nascimento waged an unceasing battle for African people on many fronts. Speaking of his concept of the Movement, he said “the Black Movement is multi-faceted, but most importantly, it is the continuous and never-ending struggle for liberation, and I think Zumbi is an excellent symbol and manifestation of this struggle.” Molefi Asante wrote in his homage to Abdias that “Abdias’ life is his victory.” Certainly it is, for to have lived such a long and productive life of work and struggle without being dispirited, diverted or defeated and leave this awesome example for those living and yet to come is an enduring victory in itself. And thus, Abdias Nascimento stands at Palmares as the Zumbi of our time, constantly calling forth the quilombo spirit and tradition of resistance, affirmation and self-produced possibility in all of us. Hotep; Ashe; Heri.