

Critical Lessons Learned...When There is No Village

**African-Inspired Rites of Passage in Practice by and for People of African Descent: Critical
Lessons Learned and Cultivated by Practitioners...When There is No Village**

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Abstract

Being initiated into “rites” the members of Alkebulan Sharo used what they had learned in the community, but as a community. The lack of a cohesive community and the scarcity of African-centered elders left the group vulnerable to attack, from without and within. Although, Alkebulan Sharo successful provided initiation for several years, eventually the *kollektive* became unsustainable. This article discusses some of the lessons learned and the proposed solution - The Akron African Village Framework.

Sankofa - It is no taboo to go back and fetch what once worked

Post slavery, there were many self-stained flourishing communities comprised of families and individuals of African descent (support). Systematic racism fueled by fear influenced those with power to create financed and legal systems, mechanisms and tools of oppression to maintain political, economic and social control over those communities. This included everything from jim crow, black codes, lynching and redlining, to urban renewal, gentrification, and the prison-industrial complex of today. Strong systems of oppression that were designed to maintain themselves and preserve white middle class patriarchal status quo.

Like many of those communities, Akron, OH was dealing with the affects of the same aforementioned systems. This was further compounded by the relocation of thriving manufacturing industries (Goodyear Tire & Rubber, Firestone Tire Company, Goodrich and others) to other states and countries, paving the way for the influx of drugs into the community, which all contributed significantly to the disintegration of the families, neighborhoods and communities.

In the early 1990's a group of like-minded community activist, men and women, were introduced to the rites of passage process and initiated as facilitators, trainers and practitioners in the Akan tradition as taught by Dr. Anthony J. Mensa of Ghana. The community-based group, Alkebulan Sharo was established to provide a culturally specific context to assist individuals, youth and their families in learning about history, culture, manhood/womanhood and self. It was a whole group process for young people and their parents, and for adults interested in this type of process. The youth groups were split into gender specific groups by age. The parents met

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monthly and adult practitioners and facilitators training took place annually. After about seven years, the members of Alkebulan Sharo became increasingly challenged with interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts that needed the wisdom and council of seasoned African-centered elders and a supporting community to assist them with these challenges. It did not exist. The community had been deconstructed and neighborhoods were destroyed by urban renewal/removal. Traditional family structures that included a hierarchy of adults (parents, grandparents and even great grandparents) become less and less the norm. Several of the rites of passage facilitators and practitioners began utilizing what they had learned through the rites process in the community, but not as a community. Both the absence of community, the rise in unemployment and the scarcity of conscious African-centered elders left the group vulnerable to attack; from within and from outside the group. Subsequently Alkebulan Sharo became unsustainable.

In 2015, a new groups of community organizers / activists interested in the rites process, learned of the history of Alkebulan Sharo made inquiry into the process of how one gets initiated. Members of the group approached and challenged former members (now elders) of Alkebulan Sharo to provide a rites of passage process them (nation builders). Reflecting on the critical lessons learned from the past experiences of Alkebulan Sharo, the elders commissioned a task force to address how best to reintroduce rites in a family / community context for long-term sustainability. Some the lessons that had been learned were:

- The African experience in the United States has been one of systematic deconstruction and destruction of family and community life and an attack on the African self.
- Rites of Passage is the process, not a program, that most authentically realigns one to the true self and purpose and is the developmental process that assist the

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individual in making successful transitions through each new developmental stage of life, and that it provides a built-in mentoring and support systems along the developmental continuum.

- Systems are created to maintain themselves, therefore we need to develop our own systems to fight systems not program, and that we must create and build institutions for long term long term sustainability for our children and our children's children that will outlive us
- We must own our environment / social environments to produce healthy vibrant contributing families and communities.
- The most effective way to be engage in the Rites of Passage process, because it's developmental, is for those initiated into the process do so as a family unit not just individually.
- The quicker the group to bond the stronger the outcome and that bonding is enhanced when groups have opportunity to have gender specific sessions.
- Each session should build upon the next to minimize cognitive dissonance that can and will occur when introduced to new information.

The work of the task force

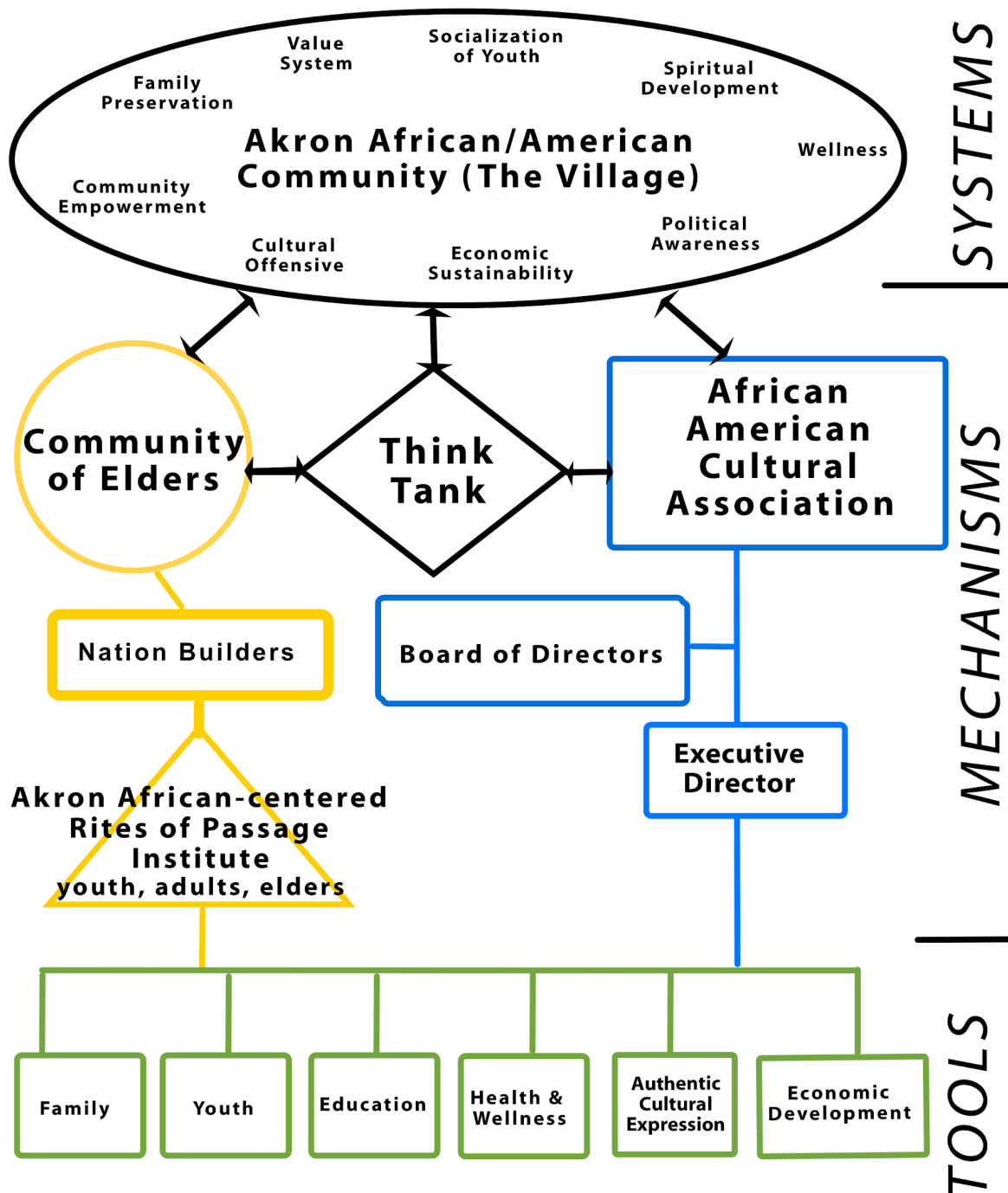
“Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power...”

Martin L. King Jr., Ph.D.

The task force consisted of former members of Alkebulan Sharo, now elders, John Fuller, Jerry Williams, Sondra Bryant, Linda Slack, and nation builder, Lathardus Goggins II. The task force met monthly for a year, developing the framework to build upon. From the lessons learned, they reflected, brainstormed, and researched African-centered concepts of village/community, the responsibilities of the various members within the community, and African-centered value systems to address the need for the reestablishment of a community-based rites process in the Akron African American community. One critical recurring theme was the need for a strong community or village to provide a solid foundation that supports and sustains a rites-of-passage process over time.

The task force believes that the Village is the manifestation of a system of values and ideas that support individuals and families around a core agreement. In our framework, we see those systems primarily focused around Family preservation, value systems (spiritual code of conduct), socialization of youth, political awareness, spiritual development, cultural offensive, community empowerment, economic empowerment and wellness. These represent the ideas that are at the core of the village concerns, conversations, and actions. However, while values and ideas become the nucleus around which village is structured, these values and ideas must be put into practice. As a result, the task force drafted a conceptual framework to establish an African-centered village for the Greater Akron area.

The Akron African Village Framework



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The Akron African/American Village framework model represents what a village looks like and how a village *should* operate in Akron, Ohio, amongst those committed to African-centered thought and way of life and initiated into the village. The purpose of this framework is to provide guidance towards a more authentic way of engaging each other, building institutions, developing community, and passing on heritage to the next generation.

SYSTEMS - The deliberate construct, concept, and theory of practice with elements of reciprocity and boundaries that support the people (individuals, family, community, race) as a whole living in the Akron African/American Community (The Village) and the supportive process for collective understanding and day-to-day living – freedom, liberty, equality, and dignity.

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MECHANISMS - Processes and institutions developed and operating in the Akron community to promote self-sufficiency and the highest level of functioning of the citizens of the Akron African/American Community (The Village).

In the Akron African village framework, the mechanisms to put village values and concepts into practice are the Council of Elders, Think Tank, African-American Cultural

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Association, Nation Builders, and the Akron African-centered Rites of Passage Institute. The Council of Elders is modeled after the traditional African village, particularly the structures found in the Akan tradition of Ghana. The Council of Elders is responsible for maintaining cultural integrity and legitimacy. The Council of Elders is to be recognized and respected as counselors, mediators, and, if necessary, judges. In addition, the Council of Elders is responsible for directing the community-based African-centered rites of passage in Akron, Ohio (Akron African-centered Rites of Passage Institute).

The Think Tank consists of scholars and experts in the core systems, dedicated to the assessment of Akron's African community. The Think Tank is responsible for identifying and researching prevailing issues. This is to include a regular report on the condition of Akron's black community and the effectiveness of the agencies working within our community. The Think Tank's assessments are to inform the Council of Elders and the work of the African-American Cultural Association about the current state of the Akron African Village.

The African-American Cultural Association is to be the "primary" mechanism to implement the recommendations of the Think Tank and the Council of Elders. The African-American Cultural Association is the legal entity through which the Akron African Village will engage the Akron community at large, various philanthropic foundations, and government agencies. The African-American Cultural Association is a 501(c)(3) organization and thus has a board of directors and an executive director. As suggested by the framework model, the board of directors is guided by the articles of incorporation, the Council of Elders, and the Think Tank. The board of directors are primarily responsible for selecting the executive director and overseeing the affairs of the Association.

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The Nation Builders, those entering the village through the rites of passage process, are responsible for doing the work of the village; be it establishing healthy families, building businesses, conducting commerce, education, taking leadership, etc.

TOOLS - Events, activities, and programs from an African-Centered perspective designed to improve the conditions in the Akron African/American Community (The Village).

Tools represent the actual programs, events, and activities (the solutions) to address the prevailing issues identified by the Think Tank and to put into practice the core values around which the Akron African Village has emerged. The Framework identifies key “toolboxes” such as, family, education, health and wellness, economic development, and authentic cultural expression, as categories of the work that is being/needs to be done.

The Village Framework brings about a balance of personal and family growth and community development, leading towards authentic selves and liberation for the individual, and making deliberate and institutionalizing necessary mechanisms and processes of practicing community. The Village Framework provides Nation Builders social understanding be supported in their work. Moreover, to see and understand how work in a cohesive social context. (See Appendix 1)

“It all seems impossible until it's done.” Nelson Mandela

The “Framework” provided a blueprint for the task force to begin reconstructing the Akron African-American Community (“The Village”). The community of approximately

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seventy-five African-centered elders from the Akron community began meeting to put in motion the development and implementation of The Village framework. After a few monthly meetings, it was determined that 1.) The Village concept was the direction to go to recreate community, 2.) that the rites of passage process must become an institution fully embraced and supported by the community, 3.) that the foundation for rites must first begin with the elders in that they hold the traditions and history to build upon, 4.) the task force would be convened to develop and implement a rites of passage process for elders which would then create the rites of passage template for the nation builders and youth, hence the Akron Rites of Passage Institute, and last 5.) that the Akron Rites of Passage Institute would find its new home within the community-based Akron African-American Cultural Association. To ensure the Institute's long-term sustainability, the proposed Think Tank, as outlined in the "Framework," would provide ongoing research and recommendations on national and international best practices to both the Institute and the Cultural Association on an ongoing basis.

Outcome 1 - The Village Framework

As a blueprint, the Framework guides the taskforce's work and provides the context to envision the reconstructed family/community. Realizing that every family, community, and nation must have a system of philosophical beliefs that directs and governs their behavior, we believe that a uniformed agreed upon system of African-centered beliefs on family and legacy, finance and economic development, culture and traditions, history, spirituality, laws and governance, etc. allows families and communities to function in a healthy, holistic way. The mechanisms that we have chosen to put these systems into practice, Rites of Passage, the

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community and council of elders, the Cultural Association, and the Think Tank are what we believe to be the most practical way to begin creating such traditions. The programs, services, and activities are now developed and implemented by men and women who not only live within the village, but are trained in African-centered consciousness through the rites process, and now have a vested interest in the family/community, its success, and its future.

Outcome 2 - Rites of Passage for Elders

Building on the work of community-based rites programs nationally and abroad made it less arduous to develop and implement a curriculum specific to elders. The task force, now comprised solely of elders, convened for a year, developing a rites-of-passage process and the related curriculum specific to elders. The process began with several sessions to introduce interested elders to the concept of rites of passage, the process, the curriculum, timelines, cost, etc. for participation. Of the seventy-five or so elders who attended information sessions, thirty made the commitment to move forward with the initiation. Once a month for fourteen months, the group of elders engaged themselves in the process; deconstructing what they had learned in traditional European culture as truths, and though each session grew stronger and more confident as a newly born community of bonded families. Each step of the process built upon the previous sessions. Each session reinforced family values and the need for community. Each session empowered the elders to see themselves in a position of honor and respect both within their families and within the community. In the tradition of rites, the group took on as one of their many projects the task of acquiring of a facility that would be owned by the community and house our library of books and resources, the Cultural Association, and provide meeting space.

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The rites process group work culminated with a celebration that included their families and close friends, initiated nation builders, and the community at large to witness their reincorporated return to the family and community.

Outcome 2 & 3 - Rites of Passage for Nation Builders & The Akron Rites of Passage

Institute

Once the elders completed their initiation, the rites of passage task force was expanded to include initiated nation builders who understood the Village framework and were committed to utilizing it to develop and implement a Rites of Passage Institute for the Akron community. This became the template for developing the rites-of-passage process for the nation builders and the youth. Since the age range for nation builders is broad (ages 18 to 54), the task force decided to create a rites-of-passage process for nation building next in the mid-life passage (ages 30-54). They would add from that group of initiated nation builders, individuals interested in developing a rites-of-passage for nation builders in the young adult passage (age 18-29), who would in turn be added to the task force to assist with the development of a rites of Passage for the youth (everyone 17 years of age and younger). This will ultimately result in the creation of the Akron Rites of Passage Institute for and by the community.

Outcome 4 - Akron African-American Cultural Association

The task force knew it needed a reliable, transparent way to manage and account for the funds collected for and associated with the rites process. In the best interests of the rites process and to maintain the integrity of the work, no individual wanted to assume personal responsibility

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for the finances. So, we built inside the Framework the most logical and practical way to attach the Rites Institute to the community - The Akron African-American Cultural Association. The Akron African-American Cultural Association began its work in 1978 and became incorporated as a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit organization in 1994. It has a long-standing, credible relationship with the Akron African-American community, hosting an annual city-wide cultural festival in downtown Akron. In addition, the Cultural Association hosts an annual city-wide seven-day Kwanzaa Celebration sponsored by different community groups, organizations, and churches. Both events are well attended.

The Cultural Associations were a great fit for the Framework in that they provided a cultural context for those initiated into the rites process to serve and create new programs, services, and activities for their families and the community. It also provided an opportunity for those interested to serve on its board. It was a logical win-win for all.

Appendix 1

VILLAGE SYSTEMS DEFINITIONS & EXPLANATIONS

Developed by Mama Sondra ‘Esi’ Bryant (2015)

SYSTEMS

The deliberate construct, concept, and theory of practice with elements of reciprocity and boundaries that support the people (individuals, family, community, race) as a whole living in the Akron African American Community (The Village) and the supportive process for collective understanding and day-to-day living – freedom, liberty, equality, and dignity.

MECHANISMS

Processes and institutions developed and operating in the Akron community to promote self-sufficiency and the highest level of functioning of the citizens of the Akron African American Community (The Village)

TOOLS

Events, activities, and programs from an African-Centered perspective designed to improve the conditions in the Akron African/American Community (The Village).

COMMUNITY

People living in the same place or having particular characteristics, social values and responsibilities, services, institutions, attitudes, and goals designed to serve the best interests of the citizens in the locality.

AFRICAN-CENTERED WORLDVIEW

This area will focus on Africa as the origin of all human civilizations. Worldview determines how one makes sense of the world they live in. People gain an understanding of the guiding principles/values of the African-centered ideology and personality.

Worldview refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual interprets the world and interacts in it. A learned perception of reality, a mental framework for thinking, believing, and understanding reality – world & human existence, purpose of mankind, and human relationships. It is the way people make sense of their environment, universe, surroundings (people-to-nature/environment, time orientation, people relations, preferred mode of activity, nature of man and things, institutions and things), and their life (Sue, 2016).

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Worldview is also the moral beliefs, principles and philosophy of conduct of which a person responds to and behaves, perceptions of right and wrong (Myers, 1993).

rites of passage

Rituals developed to aid the individual to passage in various stages in their life to ensure transition and entry into a new life situation or to ensure a successful departure from a disturbing life crisis.

History of our people

This area will focus on the initiates developing a basic understanding of the history and contributions of Ancient Africa. The study should also include the accomplishments of African leaders, heroes and sheros.

Council of Elders

Select set of elders (55+) identified and trained from the Community of Elders to serve as the guardians of the Akron African American Community (The Village) to reach the optimal level of functioning, wellness and being thru the life cycle.

Nation Builders

A group of individuals (21-54) committed to the work of unity, nation building, uplift and humanity of all people but particularly those of African ancestry– (individual, family, nation, race) in the Akron community and implementation of theoretical frameworks and Africa-centered conceptual systems which are effective in practice for African Americans. These individuals will have submitted to a process of membership that reinforcement their cultural group.

Family Preservation

The family is viewed as the single most (primary) unit whose members assume certain obligations for each other. It is also the vehicle to transmit values and culture in the community who share common residence. It is in the family that the learning and utilization of rituals, customs, ceremonies and approaches to enhance the social bonds, mutual roles and responsibilities, structures and economic functioning of African American families in the Akron community. Interventions and planned efforts will focus on strategies to promote family strengths, relationships, sustainability and offer solutions to problems using the life cycle.

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This area will focus on encompassing the immediate family, genealogy/history as well as the concept of the extended family (kin), intergeneration or community. Parents/Adults are critical in the process of the rearing of children in the community. Attention will also be given to the equal and effective management of the household.

VALUE SYSTEM

This area will focus on basic understanding and importance of the development of an African values system operating daily in one's lives. It will assist citizens in the examination of one's current values. It will include identification of the customs, standards, conduct and principles considered desirable by our people in the community. There will also be events and activities that will assist in the development and achievement of a value system in the community for future generations.

Ethos - The fundamental character or spirit of a culture; the underlying sentiment that informs the beliefs, customs, or practices of a group or society; dominant assumptions of a people or period. The character, disposition or moral element of a person, group and community that determines action.

SOCIALIZATION OF YOUTH

Development of processes to promote the healthy development, socialization and being of youth whereby they learn who they are and their individual purpose for being. Ideally through a rites of passage attention will be given to human development, self-esteem, racial and group identity as well as group ethics. Behavior expectations, roles and responsibilities and development tasks will be addressed from an African-centered paradigm.

HEALTH/WELLNESS

Health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but the state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being. This broad area will focus on covering personal care, hygiene and includes nutrition, exercise, hair and skin, use of natural products for healing, stress management and wellness. Social skills/roles will also be addressed. Citizens will understand how the physical health and wellness interplays with other aspects of life – mental and spiritual. The basic function of the body and brain to deal with a disturbing life crisis – African response to stress will also be addressed.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

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This area will be devoted to the immaterial part of humanity and nature with attention given to an orientation of a people's religious, moral or emotional self. Without focusing on a specific religion, this area will address the concepts of spirituality and how it works in our lives to assist in meeting our basic needs, reaching our full divine potential and to effectively cope with crisis.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Power is the capacity to decide for one's self. This area will focus on the process of increasing understanding of power, strength and influence and how it is used to advance the needs and improving the circumstances of the community. The concepts, practices and skills of leadership in general and in the African community will be addressed. It will encourage skill in assertiveness, conflict resolution and mediation in attaining established goals. This area will encourage critical thinking and analysis of thought in looking at problems. From a system perspective, this area will focus on the working of political structures, building as well as sustaining institutions and how they work collectively for the improvement of power for African American in the Akron community.

CULTURAL OFFENSIVE – AUTHENTIC CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Culture is the people's way of living with shared patterns of interpretation of one's reality and design for living. This area will focus on support, protection and perpetuation of culture within the individual family and community. Through use of the mythology, arts, literature, music, dance, etc. to promote pride, wholeness and being of the citizens in the community that are shared in their own image.

This area will also focus on developing a basic understanding of the African influence in music, art and dance of the people of the world. Citizens will gain an appreciation of Africa contributions in the area of art/dance and how it currently influences – attitudes, thought development and behavior for survival, liberation, healing freedom and daily living (being).

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY/DEVELOPMENT

This area will focus on the general understanding of economics in our society. People will learn how to use money to maintain balance in their lives and to have needs property met. The area will also promote the concept of cooperative economics as a value that best serves the African individual, family and community. The products, good and services, their allocation, distribution, use, ownership and association with social status power and privilege as well as the social relations that characterize the system will be addressed to promote self- sufficiency in the community.

POLITICAL AWARENESS

The process of racial awareness, collective struggle, sense of nationhood, common destiny and historical perspective will be addressed. Attention will also be given to coordinated efforts to influence social change in the Akron African American community.

EDUCATION

This area will focus on acts or processes related to learning, knowing, including thought, awareness, judgment and revelation. It will address public education system based on an analysis as to whether or not it is meeting the needs of African Americans in our community.

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