



Ikael Tafari—A Call to Arms: African Liberation and the Verdict of History

The name of Ras Ikael Tafari needs no introduction in Rastafari or Pan-Africanist circles. Since the early 1980s he has been one of the most articulate and effective Rastafari activists in the region. Scholar, activist, artist and filmmaker, he was the first Dreadlocks Rastafari to earn a doctorate from the University of the West Indies. In 1997 he became the inaugural Deputy Director of the Barbados Commission for Pan African Affairs. Seven years later he succeeded David Comissiong as Director of the Commission.

Born Michael Hutchinson into a prominent and commercially successful “white” Barbadian family, Ikael graduated from the island’s top secondary school and set off for Jamaica and the University of the West Indies Mona campus in the late 1960s. It is certainly fair to say that this was a time of political metamorphosis in the Anglophone Caribbean during which socialism, Marxism and Rastafari all vied for the minds of progressives. Arguably the singular most catalytic event during this period of transformation was the banning of Walter Rodney, the Guyanese-born lecturer who had reached beyond the confines of UWI to mobilize poor blacks in the sufferah communities in Kingston and beyond. While an undergraduate at Mona, Ikael had known Rodney personally and his banning became the catalyst for his calling to Rastafari. Three years later in 1971 he began to ‘locks,’ taking up residence with the Elder, Ras Boanerges at his gates in Goldsmith Villa—a PNP community locally known as ‘Angola’—not far from campus. In 1975 it was Ikael who organized Ras Boanerges’ first international trod into the Eastern Caribbean in 1975. After his graduation, he remained in Jamaica teaching political sociology at Mona during the last years of Michael Manley’s PNP administration.

While many brown and light skin middle class individuals were drawn to Rastafari during this period through the accommodating ideology of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, Ikael chose to identify with Elders of the House of Nyahbinghi and the founders of the movement. In a tribute to him after his transition, a friend wrote that “For the era when he embraced the livy of Rastafari [...] he was radical and revolutionary but even in this new environment, Ikael was anything but conventional, for while embracing much of the natal Nyahbinghi doctrine of hair and diet he held very socialist political views that could border on heretical in some conservative binghi circles that would “fire bu’n” the UWI as an institution and what it is perceived to stand for” (Mark Lee 2008).

I first met Ikael in 1980 at a Nyahbinghi Elders Council in Bull Bay when I was in the early stages of my fieldwork in Jamaica; but only came to really know him years later. This came about when I stayed with him in Barbados in August of 1998, attending the International Rastafari Conference, Trade Show and Expo that he largely organized and chaired. From our reasonings, it was clear that he had a deep and profound commitment to the Nyahbinghi House and its elders. He had a large framed poster-size photograph of Ras Boanerges that hung over his bed and he spoke enthusiastically about the early missions of Elders to the region in which he had been involved. These included the first Nyahbinghi Trod outside Jamaica by Boanerges and two other bredrin to Barbados in April 1975 and the 1983 Trod of Boanerges, Pa-Ashanti, Bongo Time and Ras Iboh Ashanti that followed the RITA Conference at Mona. [Ikael's book *Rastafari in Transition*, elaborates on the impact of these missions more broadly.] Despite his works with the Elders, Ikael was nevertheless an iconoclast within the 'binghi House. With respect to the Bible, for example, he rejected the claim to Black Israelite identity held by many Rastafari, arguing that this was an unnecessary appropriation from the Bible "someone else's story." While he was living with Ras Boanerges in the early 1970s he was also working for one of Michael Manley's organizations that outreached to urban youth. He refused to attribute doctrinal status to any book including the Bible. While supporting and seeking to refine the broad Rastafari critique of the colonial and post-colonial order, Ikael was critical of what he called the "denunciatory situation" in which many Rastas too easily find fault with others. He argued that "This demonizing and scapegoating comes from the fact that Rastafari remains rooted in poverty," arguing that "people who are oppressed need to project their frustrations onto scapegoats" and further declaring that "The only way that Rastafari can transcend these things is to bring themselves in line with the teachings of His Majesty!" By the time the 1998 Conference closed, it was clear to me that Ikael Tafari commanded the respect of many within the local Bajan Rastafari community and was—along with King Frank-I, Sister Ijahnya, Ras Kabinda, Ras Miguel Lorne, Bongo Wisely and others—among the "leading lights" of a new generation within the region.

Repatriation and reparations, of course, were very much on his agenda. But Ikael had no illusions about what it would take to 'bridge the gap' to Africa. While passionate about the welfare of Elders of the movement, he was clear that the goals of reparations and repatriation were unattainable through its existing local structures and practices. Working through organizations like the African Union and in concert with other progressive Africans would be necessary. When we spoke in 2007, he was skeptical that pursuing repatriation "on the grandiose scale of a massive departure" would never work. For him, the establishment of trade and cultural exchanges with African nations coupled with sustainable development strategies to support the resettlement of repatriates was the formula. This reflected, I believe, the kind of work in which he was later engaged as Director of the Barbados Commission for Pan-African Affairs.

In one of our last conversations in 2007, Ikael told me that he had traveled to Nigeria in 2006 with another brother from Barbados where both had been installed as honorary chiefs in Alaro Province. He was optimistic about his Nigerian connections, suggesting that they would be useful because "...the AU is now trying to get skilled Africans to

come home.” The result of his own recent work in Nigeria was that “Any Barbadian is now entitled to free land for themselves or their business in the Alaro Province.” On the subject of cultural exchanges, he shared with me his plans for the upcoming Bicentennial of Emancipation to be held in August of 2007 and indicated that he wanted to bring a variety of African religious practitioners to Barbados from Ghana and Nigeria.

While some might have considered him a ‘white’ Bajan, Ikael never saw himself as anything but African. Just days after delivering a keynote address to the Caribbean Historical Society (printed below), Ikael Tafari made his unexpected transition to the ancestors. His memorable words call to mind the struggle of countless Africans in the Diaspora at the present moment when progress towards reparations and repatriation are very much the fore. They also speak to all of us concerned with the liberation of Africa and Africans as well as all humanity.

Postscript. I wish to express my gratitude to Sister Nakazzi Hutchinson, the daughter of Ikael Tafari, for sharing with me the video of her father’s speech so that I could provide the transcription of his address to the Caribbean Historical Society below. I should note that the video itself was edited to exclude remarks that reflected tensions between Ikael and the then Prime Minister of Barbados, David Thompson, who later died in office. (personal communication, Nakazzi Hutchinson).

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Transcript. Address by Ikael Tafari to the Caribbean Historical Society, John F. Kennedy Auditorium, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill. Trinidad. In commemoration of African Liberation Day, May 29, 2008.

His foundation is in the Holy Mountain of Africa. God loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee O’ city of God. I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me. Behold Philista and Tyre with Ethiopia: this man was born there. And of Zion it shall be said that this man and that sister was born in her and the Highest Himself shall establish her. That the Lord shall counteth when he come to write up the people in judgment, that this man was born in Ethiopia.

Honorable Elder, Weddle Makanda Dagga, Chief Servant, and Sister Dagga, Servant; President, Brother Obika; Elders, Pan-Africanists, dignitaries, sisters and brothers. On behalf of the Commission for Pan-African Affairs and the pan-African community in Barbados, I bring you tonight greetings of love and solidarity and strength. It is a humbling experience, very humbling, to stand before such a gathering of strength of spirit, duty, and African dignity. And I thank you for your warm hospitality and family affection.

[...] It was 40 years ago this October, that myself and other students at Mona, marched [to] downtown Kingston as young...and somewhat naïve middle-class students who through we were safe from the arms of the Jamaican police. However, when we got down into the middle of the city we were greeted with glass bottle and stones and the police unleashed the batons on us...and teargas. And just as like some of those films you've seen in South Africa during the apartheid years, we found ourselves running through peoples' backyards, jumping over barbwire fences, scuttling through pit toilets to escape Babylon. It was a very firey baptism and my first sociological lesson. Nothing that I learned on the campus thereafter quite matched that first lesson. It showed me the full face of the Beast—when he takes off his mask; and it was able to inspire me on the journey and to keep me intact—and with my commitment as strong as ever—to this day.

I'd like to say that over those years, from October sixteenth 1968 until now, I've delivered many speeches, spoken to many gatherings, delivered different messages. But the message I have to deliver tonight is without doubt the most serious and the most crucial—because we stand today on the threshold of a final confrontation with the enemy of Africa. We've come to the crossroads...and I'd say there are two paths that stand before us. At the end of those two paths are two destinies. One is collective liberation; the other is individual annihilation. And I wouldn't have to point out to you that—as unthinkable as the last course is—it would mean the extinction of the African race as we know it. The stakes are that high. And therefore, I would repeat, before I get into the main part of my address, the words of the Chief Servant, “At this historical stage of our civilization, the hope for change demands that every African male or female—wherever he or she may reside in the universe—must now make an undying commitment to the cause of African liberation. That is no joke....that is where we stand and those are the stakes.

[...] I think it is important for us to understand the words of the great pan-Africanist who prepared the way for us....one of the greatest luminaries in the firmament of Africa was Kame Nkrumah. And he it was who said, on the occasion of Ghana's independence, in 1957, March. He said, “Ghana's independence is meaningless unless all Africans are free.” And before him, the great Marcus Mosiah Garvey...and before Garvey, Edward Blyden and Martin Delaney had said, “Africa for the Africans, those at home and those abroad!” Emperor Haile Selassie I, on one occasion before the United Nations, observed that “*Africa awaits its creators.*” And by that he was referring to those in the Diaspora who will return home to rebuild Africa. And finally, from our own womb in the Caribbean, Robert Nesta Marley, I'm sure you know, said, “*How good and how pleasant it would be before God and man to see the unification of all Africans. Africa Unite!*” And that is the message that will give us the victory—Africa Unite! Because the Pan-Africanists from the beginning—Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Ras T. Makonnen, Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, Malcolm X—all of the great Pan-Africanists—Kwame Toure—they all spoke of the vision of a free Africa, united and integrated with its Diaspora. Because the overthrow of Africa was the cutting asunder of Africa—cutting Africa in half—shipping half of Africa into the West—into the belly of the Beast—to build the industrial centers of Britain, and France and Germany—while Africa was drained of its manpower and its womanpower. African villages were destroyed.

Africa wasted away! In the words of Walter Rodney, 'Europe underdeveloped Africa.' So if the dividing of Africa asunder was the beginning of the rise of Europe, then the only way that Africa can regain its place, and its pride of place in history, is by brining together again the sons and daughters of Africa in the West and uniting them with the sons and daughters at home on the continent. Once we do that the full power will be restored.

And towards that end, there were seven major pan-African congresses kept during the course of the twentieth century, beginning in 1900 with the Trinidadian by the name of Henry Sylvester Williams who kept the First Pan-African Congress in London at the start of the century. And from there the movement developed and built up until the climax up until 1945, the first climax in Manchester when Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya, James and Padmore, gathered together in London, in Manchester and they declared that the time had come for the African leaders to go home to their country and fight for political independence. And the word was "Seek ye first the political kingdom." And Nkrumah returned to Ghana by 1957 Ghana was independent. And Kenyatta returned to Kenya and Kenya gained its independence—but that was still not enough. And then there came further voices like Amilcar Cabral from Guinea Bissau and Walter Rodney and C.L.R. James who spoke about the need to redistribute the income even within the African world so that class barriers within the African world could be broken down. They spoke about socialist revolution right up until the 7th Pan-Africanist Congress in Uganda in 1994. And then, of course, as we all know, there was a major epochal dismantling of the Soviet Union, the International Socialist bloc fell, and we were left with one superpower and a reunited colonial power—Britain and France resurgent. And since that time, we have witnessed many driving back of all of the gains that we made. But while these things were taking place, some things were going on, something that our news media have not focused on. They focused a lot on Darfur and they focused on the Sudan and they focused on the problems going on in Somalia. And they focused on the poverty in Zimbabwe. But they do not tell us that quietly, steadfastly, but surely Africa was coming to a unity.

On this very important African Liberation Day, the twenty-fifth of May, 1963, under the chairmanship of Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, thirty African heads of state came together to form an African Unity—an Organization of African Unity. And on that foundation, they were able to build such a strong unity that through the organization's OAU committee, they were able to liberate the last vestiges of colonial domination in Africa. They were able to set Zimbabwe free and Guinea Bissau free, and Namibia. All these victories were the fruits of the unity of the Organization of African Unity. And on the foundation, in July 2002, a second floor was put in the African building of unity. A second floor called the African Union. And through the African Union we now had an African one single policy-making body. And that body in May 2003, it stretched out its hands to the people of Africa in the Diaspora. And for the first time since the time of slavery, for the first time since those days, Africa at home stretched out its hands to Africans in the Diaspora.

It is important to understand that this was because the people in the Diaspora had made a major contribution to Africa's unity and power. Pan-Africanism—which is the voice of a united Africa—did not emerge out of the continent. It came out of the Caribbean—out of the Diaspora. It came out of the crucible of those who had everything taken away from the. It was the voice of Trinidadians like C.L.R. James and George Padmore. It was the voice of the great Marcus Garvey that raised the cry of a united Africa.

You see, in the Caribbean we didn't see Zimbabwe and Uganda and Ghana and Nigeria. We didn't see Ashanti and Zulu and Yoruba and Ibo—because in the Caribbean we were shorn of all those tribal cloaks. All that we saw, all that remained was AFRICA—the whole of Africa; Africa as one! And therefore, when we look at the struggle for African liberation, we see two forces. We see that in the Diaspora the voice has come repeatedly for a United Africa that came out of the Caribbean, out of the United States. But at the same time the spiritual center of African liberation is Africa itself. It is the continent of Africa, the people at home. *It is the source to which we have to return. It is the origin from which we all come. It is the foundation.* And therefore, if we can bring together that center, Africans at home with the strength of our people in the West, we will have the power to reunite and to bring about the African renaissance and to overcome all enemies.

And if you think these are just words, these visions of our great Pan-Africanists have come to a fulfillment. For in 2003 the African Union foreign ministers came together, and under Article 3 in their constitution they invited the people of Africa in the Diaspora to participate fully as the Sixth Region of Africa. So that now we have Africa West, Africa East, Africa North, Africa South, Africa Central, and most crucial, Africa in the Diaspora. A very historic occasion brothers and sisters. The most important day that Marcus Garvey dreamed to see—that all the prophets and patriarchs and matriarchs of the African struggle lived to see. And yet we are alive in this time to witness these things come to a fulfillment. But how many of our people are aware? How many of our political leaders? How many of our spiritual leaders? How many of our teachers? How many of our men of letters at the university? How many of our media houses are aware that we have entered a new chapter in African history and a new stage in the liberation of the Africa people. Because, you know, a victory that no one is aware of is not really a victory at all. A victory that you are not able to possess, that you are not able to claim, that you are not able to get any power from because you don't even know it exists...so we have to spread the word. We have a lot of work before us. This group of people, this congregation, this gathering—the brothers and sisters of the Caribbean Historical Society—these stalwarts of the NJAC movement, those who lit the fires in 1970, now have a very awesome responsibility. Because as we look across the political landscape, we see that they have no vision. They have no destination to take their people. So, we the people, we the activists, we those who see the vision and who are committed to the cause, have to take up the struggle to bring these words on this invitation by the African Union, to reality.

The African Union has made it clear, as you have to begin somewhere, they want us to select twenty representatives from among the Caribbean and the United States and South America to sit in their ECOSOCC. Now ECOSOCC is the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union. It is a major policy-making body of the African Union and

it is comprised of 150 members. We have twenty. But the African Union has made it clear that this is just the beginning. They want to see the measure of our commitment. And if we are committed, they have made it plain and have stated openly that they wish to see the Diaspora represented on the scientific and technical council. They wish to see our representatives seated within the Pan-African parliament which has a major voice in the policymaking in Africa and African affairs. They wish to see us as part of all of the different organs of Africa—the AU Commission and all of the other areas, they wish to see our participation. They are inviting us. They are stretching forth their hands as the Psalmists said, “Ethiopia stretch forth her hands unto her people.” And therefore, the ball is in our court.

Since the time of this [2003] meeting, I would like to give you just a brief background, because the AU handed over the responsibility for this process of integrating Africa and its Diaspora to South Africa, the country which went through revolutionary struggle most recently among all of the countries in Africa. And South Africa has kept a series of regional consultative conferences, beginning in Jamaica in 2006, conference have been kept in Barbados, in Paris, in London, in New York, in Brazil and in Ethiopia, so that the Diaspora has been through its representatives on some major themes. And the themes that have been headlined have been global dialogue, peace and stability, knowledge sharing, women, youth and vulnerable groups, economic cooperation, political cooperation, cultural cooperation, and regional development and integration between African and the Diaspora.

These are the themes that have guided the conferences—seven of them, kept right across the Diaspora—so that Africa can listen to the voice of her people to hear where we want to go, where we want to take Africa. There can no longer be any excuse among our people who used say that Africans on the continent don’t like the Africans in the Diaspora, [that] they consider them the children of slaves, they don’t consider them true Africans. All of this propaganda that was spread by imperial education to bring division between Africans at home and abroad has now come to naught! Africa has asserted its love and its interest and its willingness to share its affairs with the people of the Diaspora. Africa has made itself clear.

The question is now what are we, the Children of Africa in the Diaspora, going to do about this invitation? There are a number of outstanding challenges, and I will just give you a hint of some of the challenges we face. First of all, the question is [...] in which organs and in what way will Africans in the Diaspora be represented. How will they be represented? How can we ensure their level of efficiency? How can we ensure that they have the moral legitimacy to actually represent and build the African Union and protect the interests of the global African family? This idea of the Sixth Region of Africa, which has been such a strong platform to mobilize the representatives of the Diaspora, needs to be examined more closely. How will the Sixth Region relate to the other five regions? How will it work? Will it just be symbolic? Will it be literal? How can we make it work? We need to determine the modality of electing representatives. Already we see some jockeying for position. We see some people in the Diaspora already declaring that they are the ones who should sit in ECOSOCC. But we need to have people who are the

genuine representatives of the people, the African people of the Caribbean. So there is much work to be done. We have to decide in the midst of this turmoil, we have to decide how we can sit down together and plan with the people of Africa. There is a proposal for a joint commission between the African Union and CARICOM. A joint CARICOM/AU Commission has been put on the agenda. The question is, however, what about the non-governmental representatives—because as you know—CARICOM represents the governments but we also have very important Pan-African activists in the NGO movement. How will they be represented? How will this Commission be funded? What kind of autonomy will it have? Will it have some autonomy from the AU and CARICOM? These are questions that we have to raise...and we have to ask, has there been any movement, and organization, any attempt to mobilize the Diaspora to meet this challenge? I am throwing out the challenge now to the brothers and sisters of the Caribbean Historical Society that we need to come together across the region. We need to come forward with concrete plans to address this very important invitation from our brothers and sisters on the continent.

I would say at this time, for all that we have done over the years and all the struggles, this moment that is before us is more important than everything that has gone before. We are coming to the close of an age. Those of you who study history will know that every 26,000 years we come to the close of a solar age. The world is now poised on the brink of the close of the solar age. The Solar Age closes in 2012. There have been four Solar Ages in recorded history—recent recorded history. They have all ended the same ways: with cataclysmic upheavals environmental upheavals and the whole globe shaking. So, when we look out on the future of our people, we see that this is a time of crisis like never before in human history. We may be looking at the time like these things are not real, because, as you know in the Scriptures, it says, “Like a thief in the night...” So, these are things...but if you’re watching keenly, you can see the signs of it coming—the tsunami, and the earthquakes and the terrible changes in weather.

All of these signs are there to tell us that this is a time when African people must come together to plan for their children and their grandchildren and for the future. Our Pan-Africanist struggles and sacrifices have bequeathed to us a rich legacy, and at this time a very impressive building of African unity—the African Union. When, generations hence, African people examine this period of history and reflect this period that we are living in, and when they see what actions we took—or failed to take. What will be their verdict? Will they say that we rose to the occasion? That here at the turn of the twenty-first century there were some united, empowered and courageous African brothers and sisters that came together to chart a path to cultural sovereignty and to independence and to true freedom and African brotherhood and sisterhood? Or will they say that we were found loitering on the premises of this magnificent edifice of African Unity? What will be the verdict of history? It is up to us. We have to stand up and we have to do this for our children’s sake, for Africa’s sake, and for the sake of humanity because only Africans can redeem humanity! *Only those who have suffered and gone down to the lowest depths of degradation and oppression have the moral right to claim the redemption of humanity.*

And therefore, all of these things are within our grasp; but we must begin patiently, methodically, systematically, to plan, to set up working committees, to set up commissions, to relate to those themes of global dialogue, peace and stability, knowledge sharing, regional integration, women and youth—all of those themes that are before us. We must build sustainable partnerships between Africa and its Diaspora. We must come together and enhance the sovereignty of African people and the survival power of African people at this time. And only then can we say with a clear conscience before the Creator that we have done our part. It is well done.

Brothers and sisters, one brother said—

*Old pirates, yes they rob us. Sold us from the merchant ships
minutes after they took us from the bottomless pit
But our hands were made strong, by the hand of the Almighty
To forward in this generation triumphantly!*

Won't you help me sing (I literally mean, won't you help me sing) these songs of freedom...

That's all I ever had, redemption songs, redemption songs....