

‘Footprints of Panafricanism’: An Interview with Filmmaker Shirikiana Aina

by

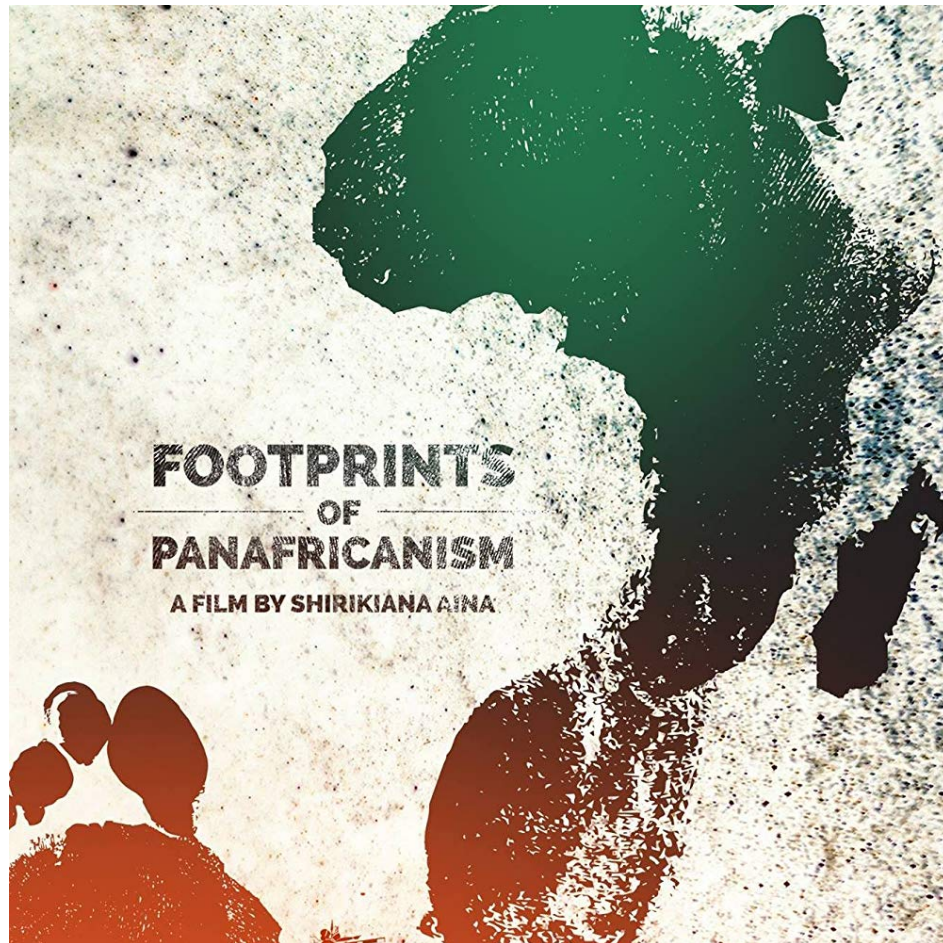
Nubia Kai, Ph.D.

Nubia Kai (aka Nubia Kai Al-Nura Salaam) is a poet, playwright, storyteller, and novelist. She received a Masters Degree in African Literature and Languages from the University of Wisconsin and a Ph.D. in African Studies from Howard University. She has won numerous awards for her writing, including three Michigan Council for the Arts Awards, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards, and the Larry Neal Writer’s Competition for Poetry. She has taught at George Washington University, University of Maryland-Baltimore and retired from Howard University’s Department of Theatre Arts.

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In today’s post, poet, playwright and novelist Nubia Kai interviews Shirikiana Aina about her new film, *Footprints of Panafricanism*. An independent filmmaker, film advocate and co-producer of the highly acclaimed film *Sankofa*, Shirikiana has been dedicated to independent cinema by, for and about people of African descent for over thirty years providing programming, distribution and exhibition of indie films. Initially a cinematographer, her interest turned to producing and directing. She has also worked as a cinematographer for various documentaries such as *Politics of African Cinema* and *On Becoming a Woman*. Her documentaries include *Through the Door of No Return* and *Brick-By-Brick*. In 1984, Aina and her husband Haile Gerima established Mypheduh Films, Inc., a distribution company for low-budget, independent, African and African American films. She is also a founder of Positive Productions, Inc., a non-profit film company organization that provides film services, equipment, editing facilities to independent filmmakers. This organization has helped independent filmmakers move in positive directions carved out through their own agency, supplying them with the catalysts and resources necessary to create and distribute films.

Aina’s most recent documentary, *Footprints of Panafricanism*, revisits the era of Ghana’s emergence into independence, when African people on the continent and in the diaspora participated in building a liberated territory. This movement, rooted in the determination to reassert Black people’s humanity and recover from the impact of slavery and colonialism, constituted an essential, indispensable part of the global Pan-African vision for liberation, which in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s ushered in no less than a Black political and cultural revolution. *Footprints* ultimately celebrates the challenges young generations continue to pose to those who have yet to pick up the baton of the great Pan-African dreamers. (This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity)



Nubia Kai: What was your motivation for doing your second film—*Through the Door of No Return*?

Shirikiana Aina: Well, first of all, we were producing *Sankofa*, and during that time I was immersed along with Haile (Haile Gerima) in the Ghanaian experience. My father had traveled to Ghana with the intention of living there when I was about seventeen, and his experience was one that became very vivid and called for more attention because he was going to Ghana after Nkrumah's exile and death. But Ghana was still a place where he could be a full person. We didn't get a chance to talk about that much, because right after he went there he caught malaria and died. So his experience was of someone who came up from Mississippi on a sharecropping farm, somebody who was very determined to find a free place. He used to talk about how Africa was a place where you could be a man, and he had never been there, but he did have this determination to find someplace.

So when my parents divorced, my father decided he was going to Ghana. He had been to Ghana a couple of times to visit, and the second time he made arrangements with a brother from there to start a business. They were going to invest in a local bus business. Unfortunately, he got very sick and passed away not long after from malaria. In following up on his life, I began to read his FBI papers. He used to always talk about the FBI and people following him, and we thought he was paranoid. As it turns out, he was right—the FBI was following him.

Kai: Was he in a political organization?

Aina: He was. They had been following him long before he became a member of the Republic of New Afrika. We thought he was just paranoid, but it turns out he was right, because there were pages of material on him from the time he joined the Navy until he died.

Kai: How does *Footprints of Panafrikanism* extend the themes of *Through the Door of No Return* and the classic film *Sankofa*, which you worked on with your husband, Haile Gerima?

Aina: It very much extends those themes. During the time we were producing *Sankofa* in Ghana we came across African Americans who had lived in Ghana since Kwame Nkrumah's time. When I began speaking with people like John Ray and Dr. Robert E. Lee, they gave us fascinating stories about how they got there and they introduced me to other people of the Diaspora. So Haile and I began to talk to the Minister of Culture at the time who was Dr. Ben Abdallah about doing another film that would be a follow up. And Dr. Abdallah was very receptive to the idea. He was the person that made *Sankofa* possible in many ways because he helped to co-produce it. The Ministry of Culture was the co-producer. They made sure that most of our local expenses were taken care of, and that was a big part of the budget. That was very helpful. When we proposed following up with the second film he was excited because he was a child of Nkrumah; he was of that generation and knew very well the impact that Nkrumah had on the African Diaspora. So that's how *Through the Door of No Return* began. Some of the funds that came from *Sankofa* were re-funneled into *Through the Door of No Return*. The themes from *Sankofa*, which were very much about resistance and self-determination also comes through *Through the Door of No Return*.

These themes resonate with my own family's experience—as it does for many people of African descent. My parents were living in the southern cauldron of extreme oppression and migrated north and found another cauldron of oppression. All these instances find us carving out ways to survive and creating culture and renewing ourselves over and over again and becoming amazing contributors to world history, world culture and examples of resistance. That extension back to Africa, seeking another manifestation of our plight on the planet, it was just amazing to me, that kind of came full circle, which is not even complete because going back to Africa does not mean liberation. It just means another level of struggle, but that continuum is very interesting for both of those films.

In terms of *Footprints*, it looks at what happens when we went back on our own, when we approach the continent now not only as somebody who wants to make sense of that horrible departure scenario—slavery, the disbursement of us—but now going back with something to offer in terms of change. The idea that the whole African Diaspora, inspired by people like Kwame Nkrumah, can be free. That's an incredible leap. You can even call it *Through the Door of No Return*, Part II. *Footprints of Panafrikanism* is saying yes, slavery happened, and we've got to figure out how to come to grips with that. Meanwhile, we are also like the Sankofa bird building something. There are bricks here we're going to put in place as we heal; there are bricks that we're going to put in place for our real liberation. That is what happened during those Kwame Nkrumah years.

Kai: There was a twenty-year hiatus between the time you produced *Through the Door of No Return* and *Footprints of Panafrikanism*. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in putting together this film?

Aina: You know, it's funny that you put a number on it. I've always been afraid to put a number on it because it's such a big number. Hearing you say that the first thing that came to mind jokingly—but also very real—is the mere job of trying to figure out how to make this thing work.

Kai: I know you're also a business woman and the mother of six children! (*Laughter*)

Aina: Yes, and there were a few things I did in between. We also own a bookstore, which keeps us busy. And, as you point out, we did raise six children. I guess you can measure those years by films and kids as landmarks.

Kai: You and Haile's films are politically and socially relevant. I'm sure it's difficult for you to get financial support from government grants or private corporations. How did you fund this new film project?

Aina: We were very lucky that *Sankofa* had the kind of response that it did. We were able to take *Sankofa* to theaters in different cities around the country for two years. It was a very laborious process, but it allowed us to have a face to face relationship with the audiences. We also educated more people about what that film making process was about and the funding process and encouraged more people to go into producing, to distribution, to owning the film-making industry, the film-making process. Some of the funds that came out of the *Sankofa* distribution went into *Through the Door of No Return* and to *Footprints of Panafrikanism*. It was enough money to get us started. The majority of the time that it took to complete *Footprints* was spent on fundraising.

We started it on celluloid film, and then you can see the evolution of the video/digital industry along that twenty-year spectrum. Eventually, it became possible for me to digitize, to edit digitally. There were a lot of expenses that were incurred during the process of film-making, but I didn't have to pay for them all. I did have to pay for the labor, especially to tackle things—such as editing—that I could not do on my own.

In the end, a lot of the people who worked on this film did it out of a labor of love—either underpaid or they wanted to see the film completed. I can't say that *Footprints of Panafrikanism* was actually ever funded in that sense. We made it happen. It is more and more possible to do films with very little funding if you're going to shoot that way. But for us it was just the determination to finish the film. The initial funds were in the actual shooting and production of the film and the transferring of the film. Once we got that done, the rest was like a half step to finish.

Kai: Many African Americans tend to overly romanticize Africa, yet in this film it seems that the positive things we envisioned are actually real, at least during the years that Nkrumah was president of Ghana. Do you foresee in the near or distant future a mass migration of African Americans back to Africa?



Shirikiana Aina (photo provided by the interviewee)

Aina: I don't see that. I'll tell you what Dr. Robert E. Lee said to me. He said that being a Pan-Africanist is making liberation possible for Black people wherever you are. Everyone doesn't have to go to Africa to make that happen. I think that clearly the stability of Africa impacts the stability of Black people around the world. So a weak Africa means a weak Diaspora, and that relationship is one that we can never ever underestimate. One of the ideas of the Nkrumah viewpoint was that there is no way that part of Africa can be free without all of Africa being free, and there is no way a Diaspora can be free without Africa being free as well. Though it's a simple thing to say, it's incredibly real.

Kai: Do you have plans in the works for another film?

Aina: My next project is on Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture). I focus on his experiences in Africa, which is one aspect of his life we really need to know more about. As you know, he got his first name from Kwame Nkrumah and his last name from Sekou Toure. Why was that important to him? How did he begin to think of that as his next important move? These are some of the questions the film explores. I'm very much looking forward to completing it.