## **Skeptics of a Different Color**

## By Norm R. Allen Jr.

The February 1987 issue of *American Atheist* featured a special section on "Atheists of a Different Color" in which Black atheists were discussed. I will now feature a long-overdue piece on Blacks that have promoted skepticism of paranormal claims, fringe science and pseudo-science.

Why not start with myself? When I was involved with organized humanism, I was the only full-time African American secular humanist activist traveling the world promoting secular humanism and skepticism. I sent many copies of the *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Skeptical Briefs* to numerous groups throughout Africa. Moreover, I arranged to have many books on skepticism from Prometheus Books sent to groups in Africa.

As a writer and editor with *Free Inquiry*, I wrote articles on faith healing in the Black community and the ways in which psychic hotlines exploited African Americans in the 1990s. I advocated skepticism in numerous other articles and in various speeches, and wrote about it in my essay in my second book, *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion*. (pp. 147-163)

Anthony Burnside is a magician from Kansas City, Kansas. Like James Randi, Burnside has used magic to promote skepticism of untested claims to knowledge. Burnside was especially impressive in demonstrating how Filipino fakers use "psychic surgery" to supposedly remove tumors from sick people.

Secular humanist activist Leo Igwe of Nigeria has done great work to promote skepticism in Africa and abroad. Igwe, a fellow with the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), has worked with me and many others to combat a belief in witchcraft and the persecution of alleged witches and wizards, primarily in Africa. He has also sponsored Darwin Day celebrations in Nigeria, and encouraged them in other African nations.

I traveled to Nigeria five different times to promote humanism and skepticism. Leo and I met in Gambia to help promote humanism and skepticism with Gambian humanist leader Ebou Sohna. We spoke at elementary schools. At one school, Igwe handed out copies of the *Skeptical Inquirer* to any student that asked a question, to impart to them the importance of seeking explanations.

From October 21-22, 2008, the Nigerian Humanist Movement sponsored a conference on the Osu caste system and untouchability in Nigeria. I attended and gave a presentation. One of Nigeria's leading physicians, Dr. Jide Akeredolu, delivered the World Humanist Day Lecture. The noted skeptic was critical of alternative medicine, a belief in intercessory prayer to heal sickness, etc.

Fadel Niang of the Center for Inquiry/Senegal is perhaps the only Black activist that focuses primarily on skepticism. Igwe and I attended the first skeptics conference in Africa hosted by Niang and the Center for Inquiry/Senegal. Niang, a physicist, promotes skepticism of beliefs in psychic phenomena, astrology, clairvoyance, etc. He is a student of the noted skeptic Henri Broc of France.

Niang, a professor at the University of Thies in Senegal, is, like me, an admirer of the late Senegalese physicist, Egyptologist and multi-genius Cheikh Anta Diop. Diop, too, was a skeptic. He said that if psychic phenomena were real, science would be turned on its head. (To learn more about Diop, see Ivan Van Sertima's piece on Diop in my first book, *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, pp. 72-84.)

Hubert Henry Harrison from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a well-known agnostic, religious critic and human rights activist. He was also a skeptic and was once involved in a séance in an attempt to debunk spiritualism. He lectured in defense of evolution and a scientific understanding of the universe.

Famed astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has long been a skeptic. He is a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and has attended numerous skeptics conferences hosted by CSI. He has visited the Center for Inquiry, which houses CSI. He has been a critic of Intelligent Design and those that believe in alien visitations from outer space, alien abductions, etc. However, skepticism is not his main focus. In an interview I conducted with him in the December 2011/January 2012, Volume 1, Number 3 issue of *The Human Prospect*, he told me:

I'm a huge supporter and fan of the skeptics movement. But I'm much less of a participant in it than others are....I don't have that energy. I don't have that time. I don't have that interest. You don't see me debating UFO people, or moon hoaxers, or crystal readers, or spoon benders. I just don't do that. I think I have a different mission in front of me, and that is to get people thinking in such a way that they can judge these claims on their own – rather than come after the fact and try to undo the belief system of the believers. Like I said, I'm a supporter, and I'm fully read on the subject, but I don't take on the public directly on those issues. Life is too short. (pp. 17-18)

Reginald Finley, Sr., aka the Infidel Guy, of Atlanta, is a well-known non-theist and has had his own podcast. In November of 2001, I invited him to speak at the Center for Inquiry's conference with the theme "Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?" Finley and his ex-wife were former telephone psychics. He discussed how psychics are able to get gullible people to reveal all kinds of information about themselves to those professing to have psychic ability.

Notably missing from this list of skeptics are Black women. Though there are numerous Black women involved in organized humanism, they do not seem to be attracted to organized skepticism. Perhaps this could be changed if organized skeptics focused on paranormal claims that are more culturally resonant with Black people in general and Black women in particular. After all, you just do not hear about many Black people claiming to have seen Bigfoot or claiming to have been abducted by extraterrestrial aliens. Still, I suspect that Black women's disinterest in organized skepticism probably has many little known and little discussed reasons, and that organized skeptics should be serious about finding out what they are.