Lincoln-Barnes Lecture
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Art as Community

Thank you, Dean Gooch … and thank you for your thoughtful and efficient stewardship in arranging this introduction of the Arthur Hall Collection to the Lincoln University community. I also thank President Robert Jennings for his immediate and enthusiastic recognition of the many benefits of making a permanent home for the collection here in this venerable institution.

I am here today because Arthur Hall inspired me, over 35 years ago, to explore in film the intersection of art and culture and education. Together, in 1977, we produced **Snake Dance Teacher Dance**, a portrait of a West African Festival in an elementary school in a small mill town in Maine. The State Department of the United States put a copy of **Snake Dance** in each of our African Embassies. I thought that was that – a successful little film doing some good in the world – but Arthur's vision was vast, and his goals included nothing less than remaking our society into a more perfect union. He had a great ability to read people, to see into the core of each individual, and to inspire you to reach for your full potential – and when Arthur called, it was foolish to say no. Over the years, Arthur called on me as a filmmaker and photographer, a writer and secretary, a documentarian and a preservationist. Eventually, he even cajoled me into dancing in costume on stage. And, as with the other members of his company, Arthur was always teaching about the complexities and values of various African cultures.

Arthur Hall's life can be seen as one devoted to using the arts to build community. In Philadelphia, in schools across the country, in communities on four continents, and finally – in

his last days – in Mid-coat Maine with the International Dance Center, Arthur Hall used traditional African arts – music, dance, sculpture, costume, art, poetry, religion and philosophy – as unique expressions of modern communities. The Arthur Hall Collection reflects this history, as it reflects Arthur's art and his life's work. With a permanent home at Lincoln University, the Arthur Hall Collection will provide a rich potential for interdisciplinary scholarly works and for the inspiration of new creative works long into the future – and it will provide a living memorial for a great humanitarian and a unique genius.

Arthur Hall was among the most remarkable people I have ever known. He was an artist and a healer. He used his art and his ministry to lift people up and to build communities large and small, local and global. He had a vast and creative vision, based on his encyclopedic knowledge of African and African-American arts and cultures, which he used to "Return Grandeur to Blackness," as he would say, and to use African forms and African wisdom as expressions of community – from the grandest concert stage to the most humble Kindergarten class. He had a special affinity for those who were damaged in one way or another, in body or in spirit. His life and his work remain an inspiration for anyone who aspires to self realization as a fully whole human being.

Arthur's achievements are all the more remarkable given his humble beginnings. One could say he began with four strikes against him. He was born in 1934 into what he called "a broken home" in the poor section of segregated Memphis, Tennessee. He was raised by his maternal grandparents, who were deeply troubled by the prevailing culture of racial discrimination and by continuing lynchings. Growing up in such a culture leaves its mark.

Young Arthur lived in a thin-walled tenement, too cold in winter, too hot in summer, no electricity, no plumbing. His childhood chore was cleaning the soot from the flue of the kerosene lantern. He was a shy boy, but he was observant, and he had a good mind. He was spiritual – raised in the Beale Street Baptist Church – and, from an early age, he was literate. He took refuge in books, and it was in books, on the cool banks of the Mississippi, that he first encountered **African Gods and Kings**. "The idea," he said, "was that you began here in slavery, and you were not supposed to go beyond that," but go beyond that he would, to become the "Father of the Black Arts Movement in Philadelphia," and far beyond the City of Philadelphia, an international "Symbol of Black Culture." Arthur returned to his native Memphis in 1977, during the original tour of **Fat Tuesday and all that jazz!** There the man who had been a poor, shy bookworm was presented with the keys to the city.

During the Second World War, at age nine, he was reunited with his mother in Washington, DC, and a few years later, the family moved up to Philadelphia, where Arthur Hall would pursue his artistic dreams. As a teenager, he learned ballet and modern – and how to put together a concert – from Marion Cuyjet at her Judimar School. Later he taught classes in Sydney King's school, all the while dancing in the annual cotillion balls and in the floorshows of dinner clubs and cabarets, all of which were important social functions in the black society of Philadelphia fifty or sixty years ago.

Among the most significant early influences on Arthur Hall was that of the great Ghanaian artist, composer, and playwright Saka Acquaye. About 1954, as an exchange student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Mr. Acquaye founded the West African Cultural

Society in Philadelphia. Bobby Crowder, who I believe is still with us, was a principal drummer, and Arthur Hall was a principal dancer. Mr. Acquaye was a steadfast champion of several traditional West African cultures, even while at home in Africa preserving traditional forms was said to be regressive – "reactionary" was the term – at a time, it was argued, when the top priorities should be progress, modernization and the struggle against imperialism and colonialism. At the same time, in the United States, traditional African dance forms were often ignored as meaningless "interpretive dance," and African arts and cultures were easily dismissed in the popular culture of America as being "Primitive" or "Exotic," something for a comic turn in a minstrel show. The true richness of traditional African arts and cultures – and their profound influences in all of the Americas – was appreciated only by a few scholars and connoisseurs. The gifts brought to Philadelphia by Saka Acquaye – and others – formed the foundation for Arthur Hall's choreography. They continue to echo, and I suggest to you that this is a rich area for scholarly research and publication.

Historically speaking, Arthur Hall is a second generation pioneer in bringing traditional African dance to the modern stage. He follows in the footsteps of the great Katherine Dunham and of the anthropologist and dancer Pearl Primus. From the Ms. Dunham's School, Arthur studied with Syvilla Fort and with Lavinia Williams. He studied with Percival Boarde, who was the husband of Pearl Primus. He knew the dance world from top to bottom. He knew American jazz from beginning to end, and he knew all things African – from, as he said, "the Electric Chocolate dances of Senegal and Guinea to the ultra-sophistication of the Ashante and the Yoruba." He studied or collaborated with a who's who of the last forty years of the 20th century – John Hines, McCoy Tyner, Judith Jamison, Alvin Ailey, Eleo Pomare, Joan Myers Brown,

Max Roach and Abbie Lincoln, Olotunji, Dini Zulu, Roberta Flack, John Blake, Jr., Odean Pope, John Coltrane – the list goes on and on.

In 1958, Arthur began directing the Sydney King Dancers, the company that quickly became the Arthur Hall Dancers and then the Afro-American Dance Ensemble. It was around 1961 that I saw the company on a television special broadcast by the CBS affiliate in Philadelphia, a show which left a lasting impression on me, especially the dance called **Temptation**, Arthur's Adam and Eve duet with Ione Nash. I believe that about that same time the company started presenting programs through the Young Audiences of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and Arthur continued to work as an artist in the schools for the rest of his life. He became a movement specialist for the National Endowment for the Arts, working in schools quite literally from Maine to California. His collection includes rich documentation of a master teacher using traditional African arts as a means of self-expression in diverse communities, including an Urhobo Water Spirit Festival performed by 350 students, K-3, in Lebanon, New Hampshire.

However, it is the establishment of the Ile Ife Center which is the most important example of how the arts can build pride and a collaborative spirit in a community. During the great upheavals of the 1960s, Arthur Hall "rode the crest of the waves," as he described it, to become the director of the Model Cities Cultural Arts Program in Philadelphia, a position which he used to found the Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center on Germantown Avenue, the first cultural arts center to be founded by a dance company. Thousands of children passed through the center, studying dance and drumming and the fine arts. In addition to providing a new home for the

Dance Ensemble, there was a Junior Company and a Children's Company. The echoing drums would draw crowds to the doors, and people would press up against the glass to catch a glimpse of rehearsals. Touring companies, visiting artists and scholars, African ambassadors and kings would make their pilgrimages to Ile Ife. Arthur created the first two of his full-length ballets – **A City Called Heaven** and **Orpheus** – and within a couple years, he opened the Ile Ife Museum, down Germantown at the corner of Dauphin and Marshall. In its heyday, the Ile Ife Museum put the Smithsonian's African Museum in DC to shame. School groups were bussed to the Museum to see exhibits and demonstrations. He transformed the vault in the old Masonic bank building into a shrine for the golden goddess of love Oshun, an Yoruba name for Venus, Aphrodite, Isis - all the same archetype. "Where they worshipped money, we worship love," he said.

Together, the Ile Ife Center and the Ile Ife Museum formed the epicenter of Africanist influence in North America throughout the 1970s and 80s. Arthur developed urban renewal plans to create an African Village around the Center and Museum, complete with an African market, parks and open spaces, a theater, clustered housing, apartments for artists and visiting dignitaries, perhaps a small hotel and a youth hostel. To those ends Ile Ife received a million dollars from the Philadelphia foundation community, but then, as Chinua Achebe might say, things fell apart.

I suggest to you that the history of Arthur's plan for an African Village in North Philadelphia is a story that needs to be fully told, and properly understood, an idea that still holds promise. The United States as a whole does not do as well as other wealthy nations in supporting cultural development and the arts, and, in general, we continue to head in the wrong

direction, cutting or under funding education in the fine arts and in the performing arts, minimizing their importance as frills or as irrelevant to the advance of corporate America. The slight thaw in arts funding we enjoyed during the late 1960s and early 1970s – the Model Cities Cultural Arts Program and CETA for the Arts – can be viewed as a cynical official attempt to stop the burning of our cities. Once the riots eased up, the funding dried up. (I'm not suggesting any specific course of action here.) It is a testament to the strength of Arthur Hall's vision that Ile Ife was able to survive for fifteen more years after our society as a whole turned its attention elsewhere – greed on the part of a few, mere survival for most, and for the artists, the same old muddling along, doing the best we can, year after year.

Arthur's vision for an African Village in North Philadelphia evolved during his last years into a vision for an International Dance Center in Rockland, Maine. Both included an Archive of Black Dance and Music. "The Center will be a place for the Creative Process," he wrote, "a place for International Dance and Music to come together, perhaps to Create what does not yet exist." Part of the International Dance Center was to have been the archive we have been collecting these many years – the Arthur Hall Collection – which we now propose be given a permanent home in Lincoln University. I suggest to you that the collection is a good foundation – a beginning – for what the Arthur Hall Collection should be. There is much work to be done on the materials now in the collection, to preserve them and to make them broadly accessible, and there are many more materials that could be added to more fully realize Arthur's vision. In collaboration with other institutions here in Greater Philadelphia as well as internationally, the Arthur Hall Collection at Lincoln University can soon become an important part of a larger Archive of African and African-American Art, Dance, Music, and Culture.

The Arthur Hall Collection is a living legacy. It is reflective and it is proactive. It reflects a rich and complex history, and it contains a creative genius that can bear new fruit – in ways that we can only imagine – long into the future.

In the 256 books of poetry that contain the oral history of the Yoruba, each poem follows a general structure that serves as a mnemonic – an aid for memorization – beginning with a calling of names, then a recitation of the relevant history, and a prescribed sacrifice, if all is to be well. There follows then in each poem a section which is sheer genius. The speaker – the *Babalawo*, the Father of Mysteries – interprets the traditional lore and relates it to the present situation. He *improvises*, if you will, like a jazz musician. He brings ancient wisdom, handed down through the generations, into the here and now. Each recitation, therefore, is not simply a poetic repetition memorized by rote from the past, but it is always new. In proper hands, it poetically integrates the present with the past and suggests the proper way forward.

As we began putting this collection together, we wrote to Arthur's teacher Saka Acquaye in Ghana for his recollections. Saka wrote back to the effect that whatever we did to remember what he and Bobby Crowder and Ione Nash and Arthur created so long ago would be a good service, but for his part he preferred to be [quote] "Like the chamois on the Mountaintop" gazing toward the next horizon. As he brought specific dances to Philadelphia nearly 60 years ago, Saka Aquaye would say, "This is mine. I give it to you. Make it your own, and pass it on." To make it your own, you have to translate the traditional forms to the present moment.

Arthur Hall took Saka's words to heart and repeated them often. His is a living legacy, ever changing, while remaining true to a spirit as old as humankind, a spirit that lies at the heart of world culture, of modern art, and of modern music. "Without African art," Arthur wrote, "there would be no jazz, gospel, samba, Reggae." He called it the "Quiet Revolution – without guns or wars, we have changed the way the world moves and feels." If Arthur Hall were standing here before you today, presenting his life's work into the care of Lincoln University, he would say, "This is mine. I give it to you. Make it your own, and pass it on."