

THE NAS/VAN SERTIMA CONNECTION



BY KHALIF 'RAS' WILLIAMS

*"From this point forward, Nas' body of work reflected a sense of social responsibility bred from a deep committed love for black people---the kind that refuses to shy away from self examination or from the criticism that might alienate themselves from others. It was this willingness to examine, expose and potentially alienate himself, in the name of love, that made his work compelling and placed it within the black resistance tradition. On **'Black Zombies,'** he acknowledged, as Malcolm had to admit his own ignorance, that for a time he had been sleepwalking through life. That acknowledgment was crucial because it revealed his humility. That humility was what lent his criticism of the community legitimacy." – The Nightmare and The Dream: Nas, Jay-Z and the History of Conflict in African-American Culture by Dax Devlon-Ross*

While in Egypt on an educational tour with my family, I had a poignant discussion with an African scholar and historian. We discussed what impact a trip to Egypt would have on artists like 50 Cent, B.I.G. or Tupac if they had or took the opportunity to go on a tour to see the glory of their ancestral legacy. How would it impact their psyche and their artistic expression for the better? Nas, like KRS ONE, is the living embodiment of what self-knowledge can do for the mind, pride and artistic integrity of the oppressed. Artists, whose historical role is to tell the story of the have-nots and question the problems that remain unaddressed in society, are the mirrors that reflect the essence of what a society is or can become. And it is crucial that they work to improve what they don't like about the reflection they see.

Nas, who decided to acknowledge his reflection, has gone through many transformations since we first met him. He's been Nasty Nas, the young man juggling survival and a transition into the hazardous world of rap music to a prodigy emcee from Queensbridge projects reporting like Gil Noble about the daily happenings in his hood. He was also Nas Escobar, who was a confused artist who didn't know whether to embrace the pervasive, money-making, gangster culture he was surrounded by; or if he should tell the unadulterated, unequivocal truth of his people's story.

Ultimately, it took many years of growth and transformation for Nas to understand and express artistically, that the gangsterism he and a majority of young black males at one time glorified was not his historical heritage. He realized the legacy of his people's intergenerational oppressors was superimposed on them culturally when they were domesticated mentally as chattel slaves until they foolishly believed it was their legacy too. And not soon after he came to this realization, he metamorphosed into Nasir Bin Oludara Jones: a grown man who was self aware, unconfused and compelled to get the information that was the source of his growth and maturation out to the masses. He began using art as the medium of expression to fulfill his ancestral obligation. It had always been evident that Nas was soul searching from the very first verse he rapped on Main Source's, **"Live at the Barbecue."** But he's since transformed and has now come into his own as a man and as an artist:

"I used to worship a certain Queens police murderer/ 'Til I read the words of Ivan Van Sertima/He inserted something in me, that made me feel worthier /now I spit revolution, I'm his hood interpreter"

Nas immortalizing Dr. Van Sertima on wax has opened a new window of opportunity for the youth and adults who listen to his music to delve into knowledge of self through Dr. Sertima. The bibliographies in Dr. Sertima's work will further guide those who choose to search out and read his vast knowledge on African history and culture. Even in death, Dr. Van Sertima will continue to rock the fragile foundations of the ongoing system of oppression and mental colonization still gripping the descendants of the victims of European global expansion and capitalism. And the importance of Dr. Van Sertima to an honest rendering of the total story of humanity is best summed up in his own words:

"We have come to reclaim the house of history. We are dedicated to the revision of the role of the African in the world's great civilizations, the contribution of Africa to the achievement of man in the arts and sciences. We shall emphasize what Africa has given to the world, not what it has lost."

So what is important about Nas and his conscious awakening? It's significant because he speaks for a generation of youth whose story is never told through their eyes or told in its entirety; but doctored to suit the whims and subversive agendas of the ruling class in America. Nas can reach the masses better and quicker and captivate the minds of the youth held in his lyric laden grip because the youth hang onto his every word. And Nas has successfully picked up the mantle of edutainment using Hip Hop music as the transformational tool it was intended to be from the outset of its creation.

May Nas continue to carry on tradition and stand on the shoulders of our ancestral and contemporary giants and mature into a better artist and man more than he's already become. We owe Nas our thanks for having the self-respect and introspective yet forward thinking view of himself and the world to push the boundaries of this art form and culture we love so much.