



**NIARA SUDARKASA – A WOMAN OF HIGH PURPOSE  
BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

Dr. Niara Sudarkasa, the first woman President of Lincoln University, has a name that reflects her reality. Niara means woman of high purpose, and that she is, indeed. After leaving Lincoln University in 1998, she traveled and consulted, and has recently been scholar-in-residence at the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Last week, she donated her papers and personal library, including more than 3800 books, 4100 issues of journals and periodicals, plaques and other collectibles, including the outfit she wore when she was enstooled as a chief in the Ife Kingdom of Nigeria. This is a sister and scholar whose name ought to be spoken frequently among African American people, especially those who have concerns about the African American family, and those who have interests in things African. We are more likely to know entertainers, however, than we are to know scholars. This is a scholar certainly worth knowing.

I had the honor of traveling to Fort Lauderdale to help salute Dr. Sudarkasa on the occasion of her very generous gift (valued at more than \$270,000) to the library. In thinking about Niara's life and career, I was especially focused on the work she has done as an Africanist and anthropologist, long before it was fashionable for African American people to look at our African roots. Indeed, Niara learned Yoruba as part of her doctoral work and studies the work that women did in African society for her dissertation. Her early work lays the foundation for contemporary work on linkages between Africa and the United States.

One of the things Dr. Sudarkasa developed is the concept of the seven R's as foundations for family life. The R's represent African family values that supported kinship structures. From a contemporary perspective, when we see the R's absent, we can also explain some of the challenges that we face in family life. The R's – respect, responsibility, restraint, reciprocity, reverence, reason and reconciliation – represent the highest and best in family life and indeed in civic life. Unfortunately, many are all too absent in relations and discourse today.

Niara Sudarkasa has had the blessing and the burden to be many "firsts" – the first black woman to teach at Columbia University, where she earned her doctorate; the first black woman to teach at New York University; the first African American woman

to teach anthropology at the University of Michigan; the first woman to lead Lincoln University. Being a first isn't easy – you are carrying the burden for the race, for the gender, being judged as a representative of everyone, not simply as a human being. In those first positions, stumbling is not an option. Niara has soared, and there are so many sister Presidents and sister scholars who stand on her shoulders.

Why write a column about this phenomenal woman? Because history has a way of swallowing women's lives, and especially black women's lives, unless we insistently step up, speak up, and tell our stories. Because Niara's story is inspirational to young women and to not-so-young women. Because we ignore the real foundations of African American Studies if we ignore this woman's wonderful work.

The Shriver Report was released a couple of weeks ago, a collaboration between California's first lady, Maria Shriver, and the DC-Based Center for American Progress. It alleges that "it's a woman's world" because women are now the majority of American workers. Indeed, women have been the majority of our nation's college students for about a decade. But women still earn, on average, less than men do, and women's wages have been dropping faster than men's in this recession. I thought of Dr. Sudarkasa as I skimmed the report, thinking of the pioneer that she is, and the ways the work world has changed (but also not changed) for women. Niara Sudarkasa is among those who paved the way for women like Maria Shriver, and so many others to contemplate the contemporary status of women.

My hat is off to this woman of high purpose, an educator, author, scholar and leader whose work has made this world a better place!

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