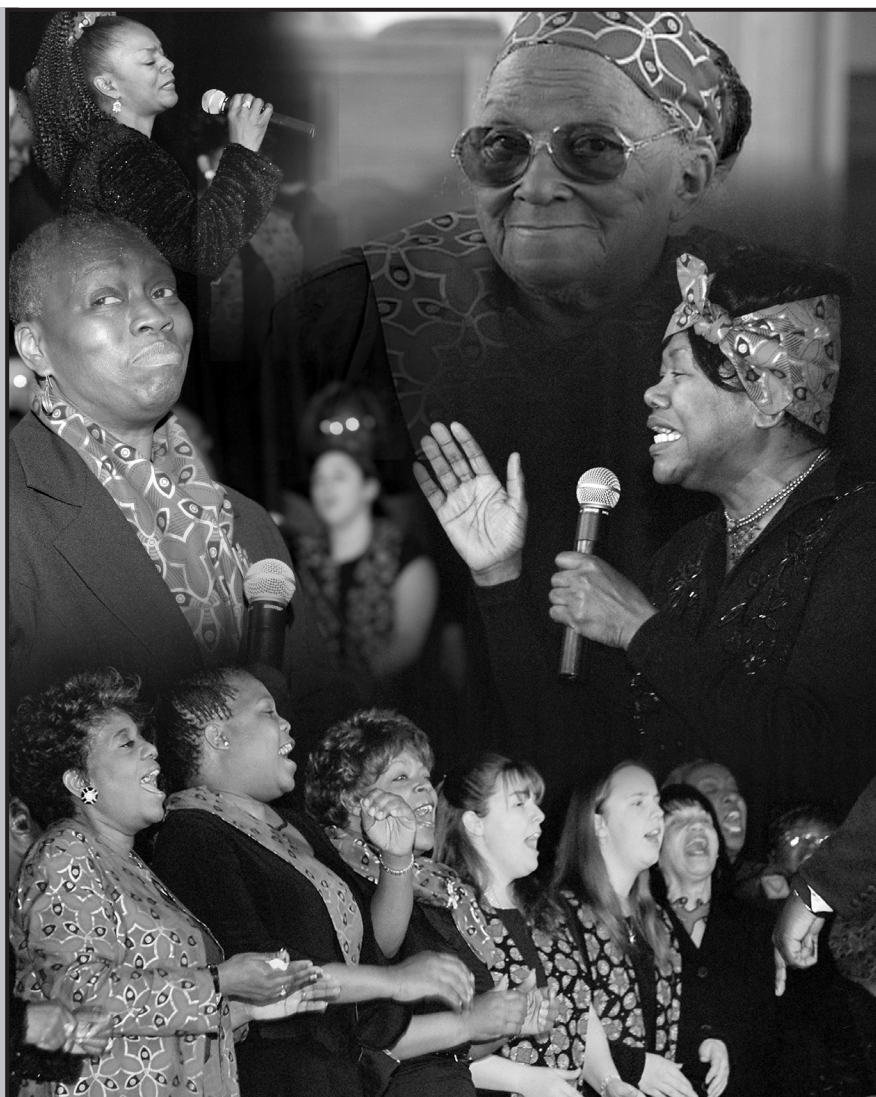


It's a room full of sisters,  
 like jewels in a crown  
 Vanilla, cinnamon, and  
 dark chocolate brown  
 We are wearing black,  
 accented with gold  
 and nutmeg brown  
 And on top of our heads;  
 some of us are wearing  
 open crowns!  
 But, it's not about how  
 we fashionably appear  
 Our beauty is in  
 the values we revere  
 We are smart, articulate,  
 and well-read.  
 With all kinds of history  
 stored in our heads...

### "A Room Full of Sisters"

By Mona Lake Jones  
 In *the Color of Culture* (1993)



Jim Hunter

CLOCKWISE---Mother Nona P. Chambers; Martha Davis Wilcox; AKOMA sings with St. John Fisher Gospel Choir at the college's annual MLK program; Maggie Moore-Holley; and Georgia Prescott.

# AKOMA is Steeped in Song

By G. E. Thornhill

Black music is an influential force rooted in African-American culture. Music was pivotal to survival. From drums and chants used in African rituals seeking good hunting, fertile soil, abundant crops, healthy livestock and sexual fertility, to music used during slavery to plot escapes and transcend pain, to the old Negro spirituals that provided the strength as well as calm it took to get through the turbulent Jim Crow and civil rights era, sacred music continues to be an inspiring force for African Americans.

Within today's church community, the sacred songs and instrumental interpretations help black people transcend everyday kinds of stress associated with work and living, and provide encouragement to hold on just another day when a great change will come forth.

Through a ministry of song and the spoken word, AKOMA (ah-ko-ma), the Rochester, New York-based African-American women's gospel choir, utilizes its expressive voice

to carry on these hallowed traditions.

Singing songs of praise steeped in the African-American spiritual tradition, AKOMA was first created in August 1995 when 35 African-American women gospel singers came together from 17 local churches to perform the final concert for the "WomanFest" celebration that marked the 75th anniversary of the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment that gave some women the right to vote. (Black women had to wait another 40+ years before the 1964 Civil Rights Act guaranteed them full access to this most basic of civic and political liberties.)

While completing her doctoral degree in American Studies with a concentration in Women's Studies, co-founder and executive director Dr. Arlette Miller Smith documented AKOMA's "herstory" as the foundation for her dissertation, *Speaking the Song, Spreading the Word, Lifting the People: The Re-imagination of Community Through Vocal Music Activism*, in which she described the original formation of the choir. Dr. Miller Smith

is Associate Provost/Dean of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Diversity Programs at St. John Fisher College.

"It seemed as if the entire city was preparing for the 75th anniversary celebration of the women's right to vote and the events that led to the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The series of celebrations were grouped under the overall title '95/75.' WomanFest, the crowning event, took place on August 26, 1995. The day's schedule included music, arts and crafts, vendors, speeches and entertainment—all by women from every ethnic, racial, service and religious group that could be assembled throughout the day-long celebration," Miller-Smith wrote. "A gospel concert to be performed by a group of African-American women was suggested as the culminating activity for the festival; however, no such group of women singers existed in Rochester."

As a member of the entertainment planning committee who had contacts at a number of local churches, Miller Smith agreed to organize the closing gospel concert. "With less than two months before the festival was scheduled to take place, a call to participate was sent to local churches in Rochester's African-American community. Weekly rehearsals were held at the Church of the Covenant, located downtown. Songs for the concert were selected to reflect the history and culture of black women who lived, survived and thrived primarily during the nineteenth century."

Words in the first song were reflective: "It's good to go back to the old time way, good to go back to when we used to pray. It's good to go back, good to go back to the old time way." The haunting lyrics of another song seemed to reach back to the pain of chattel slavery: "I shall wear a crown; I shall wear a crown when it's all over; when it's all over; I shall see his face. I'm gonna put on my crown...when it's all over."

The history of black women's struggles and strength became evident through the songs as the concert's focus evolved. "Soon bits and pieces of that history crept into/underneath/between and within the words of the songs. With each rehearsal, the history of black women in America became fashioned and fixed within the lyrics of the songs. The concert's themes paid tribute to the strength of black women as practiced through their faith, family values and service to community," she explained.

"A plow was chosen to be a symbolic representation of past struggles and triumphs. Placed strategically on center stage before the voices of the chorus were heard, the concert was no longer simply about music; its meaning moved into rememory of melodies with a message about black women!"

Each woman in the chorus wore a swatch of African fabric to represent the Sankofa link to the past and present. "The quickly assembled community of sisters had begun its formation weeks before the rain sprinkled night of August 26, 1995 and by the night's end, the seed for their continuation had been planted, watered and fed by the spiritual cloud of sister witnesses who were members of herstorical choruses and the chroniclers of a proud legacy," stated Miller Smith.

After this debut performance, the women decided to embrace a musical ministry that encompassed both their collective faith and their love for gospel music. By October 1995, under the direction of Janet Rugless-Poles, executive music director; Cheryl Holloway, conductor/soloist; and Arlette Miller Smith, founder/executive director, the 30 founding members adopted



ABOVE, l-r: AKOMA's founder and executive director, Dr. Arlette Miller Smith; executive musical director, Karen Summers; and conductor Cheryl Holloway. Other officers are: Nancy Walters (president), Debra Bell (vice president), Ruth Anderson (secretary), Gloria Wilson (treasurer), Phyllis Griffin (chaplain), Georgia Prescott (parliamentarian), and Eunice White (historian). C. Sherie Hill is the other conductor.

the name AKOMA (ah-ko-ma) because it symbolizes their African heritage while highlighting their strong spiritual roots, along with their desire to serve the Rochester community.

AKOMA's West African Akan name means patience, endurance, consistency and faithfulness; its Andinkra symbol is the "heart," which indicates compassion, tenderness and charity.

"Along with that African-centered identity, we needed other linkages to our own multiple lives, roles and rituals. Because the group collectively was rooted and grounded primarily in the Christian tradition, our motto was taken from the Old Testament book of Psalms: 'And with my Song will I praise Him.' Those words from Psalms 28:7 have been the guiding principle for the group of gospel singers since our beginning in August 1995," Miller Smith indicated.

"Additionally having been introduced to the poetry of then Seattle poet laureate, Mona Lake Jones, her poem 'A Room Full of Sisters' [published in her 1993 poetry book, *In the Color of Culture*, quoted at the top, left page], was introduced to the group. The words to the poem spoke to the heart and to the spiritual soul of AKOMA. Soon 'Room' was adopted as the poetic voice of the sisterhood," she noted.

"AKOMA's attire is signature traditional, usually solid black or white clothing with an accent piece created from an African patterned fabric," said Joanne Gordon, co-chair of AKOMA's public relations committee. "Akoma currently has five African patterns. The members are very creative in the use of their fabric. Some have fashioned the material into beautiful crowns, wraps, jackets, shawls and blouses. Others have designed creative wearable art such as belts, earrings, collars, hairs pins and cuffs," Gordon added.

"The original fabric is cinnamon brown, black and gold, colors often associated with Mona Lake Jones' poetic piece, 'A Room Full of Sisters.' Other fabric colors include what we call wax, burgundy, blue (usually worn with white) and red. We selected several patterns of fabric swatches for members to vote on. The African accent pieces became the symbol that represented 'our (un)uniform,' as characterized by one member," Gordon concluded.

Still together 11 years later, AKOMA has maintained many of





Since its formation in October 1995 as an African-American Women's Gospel Choir, approximately 20 Rochester area churches are represented among AKOMA's current roster of 40 members.

its original members who represent a "sisterhood" of 20 different religious denominations. Choir members range in age from 20 to 90 something and include housewives, educators, professionals and politicians. This unique choir of 40 African-American women united together "to speak the song and spread the Word while lifting the people." Their music style is a saving grace in music's evolution, one that motivates, inspires and encourages with a wide selection of hymns, anthems, spirituals and gospel-based sacred songs of the sisterhood that represent the struggle to survive on a higher level. Their performances provide lessons about contemporary and 'herstorical' black women, telling of their lives and accomplishments, keeping African-American history alive and in the forefront.

Committed to community, AKOMA created the Mother Nona Patterson Chambers Scholarship fund dedicated to the choir's eldest member, Mother Nona, who sings soprano with the choir. Scholarships have been awarded since 1996 to over 40 female high school seniors who were deemed "exceptional and gifted vessels" who could advance God's work while pursuing educational excellence. (See [www.akoma.com](http://www.akoma.com))

AKOMA's growth includes a governing board of officers and committees to keep the group operating smoothly. Karen Summers, a retired educator and director of music at Mt. Vernon Baptist Church, serves as executive musical director and organist, and Cheryl Holloway (who also performs as a soloist) and C. Sheri Hill are the conductors. Holloway is Chief of School Development and Operation for the Rochester City School District and directs several choirs at Mt. Vernon Baptist Church. Hill also is an educator with the Rochester City School District and is the musician at Charity Bible Baptist Church. Guest musicians also grace the stage during performances.

AKOMA's busy concert schedule includes programs at local churches, high schools and colleges—during an awards program honoring Bishop Desmond Tutu, the appearance of Seattle poet laureate Mona Lake Jones and MLK Holiday celebrations

at St. John Fisher College; as part of the Helen Barrett Montgomery and Mordecai Wyatt Johnson conferences at Colgate Rochester Divinity School; performing in SUNY-Plattsburg's Gospel Concert.; appearing on Rochester's "Many Voices, Many Visions" TV-13 show; in City12's Black History Month television interstitials, in the Penfield Symphony's holiday concert or Rochester's Summer-in-the-Park series.

The choir presented a specially commissioned docudrama at Geva Theatre titled, "Stirring the Waters, Tending the Pots: An African-American Women's Suffrage Song," created for the 150th celebration of the first women's right convention. They provided backup vocals for Grammy award winner Larnelle Harris during his benefit concert for Rochester Junior Academy. A major production at Strong Museum titled, "From Struggle to Strength: Gospel Then and Now," chronicled the evolution and strength of gospel music during the struggle for freedom.

Through its spiritual grounding in music and community, members of AKOMA are a "keep on keeping on" people. Nancy Walters, AKOMA's current president and one of the original members, says music has the unique ability to transform and direct a generation's style, attitude and speech pattern.

"I think about Sam Cooke's song, *A Change is Going to Come*. It sounds like he is coming out of that church experience, but it's a secular piece relating back to the community, saying you're not always going to be the last in line, the last to get something... change is coming," Walters reflected.

"How is change going to come about? It is going to come about in relationship to us celebrating our community. We have fun with music. Whatever mood you want to create you can create it with music and you can be silent or bluesy or sassy. If you want to be reflective with God you can create that, too."

AKOMA will continue its ministry of music, spoken word and service to community. For concert or other bookings, call AKOMA's voice mail at 585-234-6860 or email [akomage@hotmail.com](mailto:akomage@hotmail.com). The website address is [www.akoma.org](http://www.akoma.org). □□□