

Dating History: The Firsts.

Recollections from documents, participatory observations, interviews, and of voices of the era.

Written Evelyn Joe, a Participant Observer and Researcher.

This article was first written in the mid-2000s and published in African forums, including, USA Africa. Since then, some of the principals are of blessed memory. It becomes more urgent to record history from the voices witnesses event.

In International Women's Month 2023, the article is republished for the purposes of a film documentary and oral recording of the voices of African Women whose activities laid the foundation for the building of the African community in the United States (Cornerstone), and those who built on the ideals in memorable ways that yielded community collateral benefit (Mantle).

The events in the District of Columbia shaped the course of activism in neighboring Prince George's and Montgomery Counties, Maryland, Statewide, and informed the emergence of the African Community nation-wide.

By no means exhaustive, the narrative captured essence. The events, with no precedent at the time, influenced the emergence of the Continental African community abroad with distinctive patterns and an identity.

**Telling the Authentic Story:
The Making of a Community:
How it Happened.
Ethnohistory and Anthropology:
A Humanities Project.**

Documentary Film and Oral History of African Women
Who Laid the Cornerstone for the Emergence of the African Community.

**From the Grassroots to Foundation.
District of Columbia and United States of America.**

Date: Saturday March 25, 2023.

Time: 5:00pm to 8:00pm

Venue: United States Congress, Rayburn Building.

Oral history is a field of humanities study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.

From time through 1970s, the African community abroad in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere was a predominantly student population. Members were few in college campuses and largely kept to their own tight-knit circles in the community. Most, on government scholarships, returned to serve their countries. This writer's mom and dad were of that generation.

In the 1960, the Kennedy administration brought hundreds of African students to America for higher education, including Barack Obama Sr., the father of former President Obama.

Known as the "*Kennedy Airlift*," the generation marked a new and steady pattern of African migration. It has implications today, as it provides a distinguishing community identity. Black immigrants and their descendants are part of the "New American Communities" that include Africans, Middle Easterners, Latinos, Asians, Caribbeans, Jews and their descendants.

By mid-1970s, new dynamics were tested.

Some Africans in the league of **Dr. Kofi Agyapong** (Ghanaian), who had studied in the US in the sixties, inspired by W.E.B Dubois (who migrated and spent the rest of his life in Ghana) and Marcus Garvey, envisioned joining forces with historical African Americans to unite all black people. As the participants recalled, it was a time of heightened black awareness about Africa with songs like James Brown's "Say it Loud, I am black and proud." Alex Haley 's 1976 novel Roots popularized the need for American blacks to reconnect to Africa and The Saga of an American Family based on Roots received 37 Primetime Emmy Award nominations and won nine. It also won a Golden Globe and a Peabody Award The series first aired on ABC in January 1977.

The young and rising Marion Barry who came to town was wearing the African "danshiki" as part of his wardrobe.

Dr. Agyapong had formed an organization called **Sons and Daughters of Africa (SADA)**. The details entailed the mystical, too, such as returning to African spirituality of African gods - if you heard Dr. Agyapong expand on the subject matter.

On good research, there was nothing or organization attempting such activities in the city and its environs.

SADA attracted more historical African Americans and Rastafarians who believe Emperor Haile is reincarnation of a divine being. The focus was, apparently, very perplexing and a paradox to African immigrants who were more concerned about looking for jobs, supporting expectant families back home, going to school, staying safe and connected within their hometown populations and their socializing in their orbits, including at their embassies - an emotional safe space.

Another dynamism was projected by **Mr. Wondimu Mersha** (Ethiopian) who articulated bread-and-butter issues that found a more eager audience with African immigrants.

By the early 1990s, the African immigrant community was transforming to an emerging community, at a pace of exponential growth, from a predominantly

student to a multifaceted population witnessing the birth of first generation born in the Diaspora and a professional class of Africans in the American workforce with also professors in college campuses – notably at Howard University and the University of the District of Columbia.

An emerging community whose growth is not matched with corresponding institutions and resources to address its attendant needs. The referenced and aspired standards for the African community was the Hispanic community with CASA (Policy, Advocating, Orientation; Training, Resources); Ayuda (Legal Aid) Salud (Healthcare).

In fact, Gustavo Torres, the co-founder and long-term Executive Director of CASA was African community's best friend.

The idea of African issues (not generic blacks) was often looked upon with mild amusement and skepticism by some historical African Americans while some were not amused at all.

The latter category accused the Africans of many things, not the least – as being ungrateful. To these, the Africans did more than chuckle; they used some choice words, too, which generally meant they owe nothing, America is a land of opportunity, hard works is key, they support themselves and their families, including in Africa, are primary obligations; not ideologies or movements.

At the best of times, mutual suspicions lurked beneath the surface of these rare conversations for those bold or eager enough to venture into the encounter.

Meanwhile, **Dr. Kofi Agyapong** had not given up. He took a two-pronged approach to redress fears and upgrade knowledge. He found a friend in **Dr. Rufus Olumba** (Nigerian), with multiple doctorate degrees, including in mathematics and physics, who was communicated with God, as he explained, to find solution to the plight of black people. He normally spent 12 straight hours dealing in, and explaining, astrology.

This writer spoke with, and regularly visited. Dr. Olumba and Dr. Agyapong and engaged in three-way discussions. Many, including Dr. Agyapong and Dr. Olumba himself, concluded that Dr. Olumba must either be a genius or completely mad. Dr. Olumba sought to prove the former to be truer. He is an orator.

SADA held steady presence in the government owned **Reeves Center** at the revitalized **U Street corridor** to have Africans to unite for their liberation.

Africans, according to the ideologies, meant black people at home and abroad, from the descendants of the enslaved to the colonized.

The **Reeves Center** sessions had a curriculum called ROOTS (Reclaim Our Own Through Studies). The lessons was co-taught by **Dr. Mary Anigbo**, a historical African American who had lived in Nigeria and vocal promoter of Afrocentric education, especially for black boys. She later founded the Marcus Garvey Public Charter School. A Washington Times reporter went there and hell broke loose.

With time, attendees at the Reeves Center narrowed to predominantly historical African Americans who of various inclinations - from those interested reconnecting to Africa to reclaim what is rightfully theirs or to liberate it, to those who believed in the declaration of Kwanzaa as a universal practice for black people all over the world.

At a point, an African from Kenya asked: *What? You say you want to reconnect to Africa; you invent something in America, and what Africa to adopt it as superior to their cultural systems? Why don't you learn real African values?*

More of the Africans (immigrants) who remained did so with simpler hopes of having an association that could be used to advance the rights of African immigrants and some came out of curiosity. They were increasingly bored and finally wearied – or burnt out by the lectures.

Dr. Agyapong calls this writer “my niece” to this day. He would say “*my niece, you are very intelligent, I wish you can understand SADA is about.*” At other times he called me “a negress.” Whatever it meant, the sessions were more of entertainment value than practical. There was no discernible evidence of changing people’s orientations or priorities.

At less animated times, I would say things like, “*uncle, you need to know your target population.*” “*Africans do not migrate for the liberation of black people.*” “*They even learnt about Tennessee Valley Authority while schooling in Africa.*” “*They have families to take care, that is a topmost priority.*” “*People are working two shifts to make ends meet.*” “*You need a different target population.*”

Dr. Olumba commented at the time, apparent conceding: “*Continental Africans, even the ones born tomorrow know their villages in Africa, they can go and inherit their great grandfather’s house if they want. They are here for greener pastures, they want to go to best school, they focus on their families, buy cars, they dance*

owambe during weekends in their town parties. They are not interested in socializing here.

African Americans who are coming are in different fantasy Diaspora. We should talk about how they can organize and help themselves, look at what is happening with the youths – drugs and drive by shooting from DC to Detroit. How can they liberate Africa or teach Africans? Did you not hear what the African professors were saying? These are two different communities. Kofi should be realistic. The plight of the black man needs divine intervention. ”

Exasperated, **Dr. Agyapong** castigated and termed the unconverted to the SADA or ROOTS teachings as: ***un-serious minded and lost negroes and negresses***. This caused more laughter than debates. Depending on how far anybody was on the scale of learning about, or confused by, black unity, the divergent courses ended the experiment at the Reeves Center. He vowed never to talk to *lost negroes and negresses*. These were temporal outbursts.

He had another 501 c 3 organization called Brotherhood and Sisterhood International that calls for blacks and whites uniting communities.

Sooner, African activists took a different path. The Reeves Center sessions eventually stopped.

African activities began articulating *Mersha Wondimu-like* ideas to the halls of the District of Columbia Council where their luck fared no better in the Chocolate City. In a majority black city, the audacity was matched by incomprehension echoed by easily offended opinion leaders, who, like their white colleagues, were seeing black immigrants in their dozens for the first time, not dancing in festivals but talking about their rights.

A newly minted board of education member, a black guy, on hearing the ideas, was truly puzzled as he asked: ***Are you all not glad and lucky to be in America? Why do you want to be Africans?***

Is that man crazy? Asked as a rhetorical question to no one in particular and in many variations, the members of the African delegation laughed uncontrollably after exiting the elevator.

So far for advocacy. But no one was daunted. The adventure was characteristic of the time.

Notwithstanding the long odds and contending with ceremonial proclamations of symbolic African days and events by the DC Council, early supporters such as the **late Councilman Dave Clark** empathized with the Africans and agreed that the different daily realities of immigrants are overriding.

The assumption that as a norm, African immigrants and descendants assimilate in the larger African American community, melting their orientations, discarding their culture, patterns and social activities, were fallacious. "It is not the American way or reality; it is a constricting bubble," Mr. Diabe, an activist from Burkina Faso and a Thomas Sankara enthusiast, said.

At one of the impromptu meetings, where activists can spot an official and engage the person, including at the parking lot, he said "Africans must find their feet as Jews and Latinos do, then we can work with African Americans or anyone as equals." **Mr. Silverman**, a white board member of the DC Board of Education, nodded and gave his cards.

Mr. William Lockridge, a black board of education member, was also sympathetic to new ideas. This writer and others visited him in his house in Ward 8 to advance the theories and realities.

Professor Sulayman Nyang (Gambian) then Dean of the African Studies Department at Howard University provided research guidance. He coined the term Continental Africans (or people traced its origin to him) as the descriptor for African immigrants and descendants of African immigrants.

On the big idea, **Dr. Olagari** embraced what later became the Continental African approach that the African immigrant and their descendants must first create their own mechanisms. He noted, when he called for a meeting, "What Dr. Kofi is doing with SADA is for those black militants to maintain their emotional sanity as they perpetually think of returning to Africa as Marcus Garvey said."

In an opening session at one the meetings at a location on New Hampshire Avenue, he read from a paper “ *The African immigrants and descendants, like the Jews did in the 1930s and the Latinos and Asians are doing, must organize and solidarize first. It is not realistic to believe they can be assimilated or swallowed into abstract and generic black talks and abandon their own realities. They can then partner with African Americans on common issues while each take care of their own primary duties. We need to make friends with other groups.*”

African Women

African women coming together was pioneered by personalities with established rooted in their communities as leaders in their personal recognizance. **Dr. Catherine Uzoma Unonkwo** (Nigerian) was the Director of Howard University Sickle Cell Department).

Mrs. Soffie Ceesay (Gambian) was a popular organizer in the Gambian community. Both engineered conferences on heady topics such as African women’s health, genital mutilation, challenging Western orthodoxy with African perspectives, politics in Africa, and women led community agendas.

Soffie's added expert ability to dance the Senegalese and Gambian oriented "saba," projecting an authentic African dance. Africans adopted it! Now, you had various nationalities enthralled by saba. Such occasions were forerunners for African festivals.

Adam Ouologuem (Mali) a journalist and **Mariam Bah** (Senegal) energetically sensitized African events. Adam was the President of the African Journalists Association. The experience and spectacle of African immigrant women transcending national borders and organizing based on shared African cultures, orientations, values, and daily realities were catalytic. The impacts projected a common self-identity. “African Women” entered the lexicon of community-based advocacy.

Professional associations took hold: **African Lawyers Association** event under the leadership of its president **Michael Davies-Sekle** (Liberian) and last active president **Sadu Bah** (Sierra Leonian) produced

scholarship programs. The **African Journalists Association** was supported by Freedom House.

By the late 1990s, a swelling professional class was established. The reputation of Africans as the most educated ethno-demographic population in the United States, evident by US census, was quoted far and wide with the surge in aspiration and optimism.

Dr. Stanley Onye (Nigerian) to Dr. George Ayittey (Ghana) with Free Africa Foundation, Africans began speaking for Africans about anything. As ideas among Africans germinated into willful actions in old fashioned advocacy, more rainmakers entered the space.

Opportunity arose.

Former Mayor Marion Barry aimed to return to the seat as Mayor. **Mr. Lanre Banjo** (Nigerian) teamed with the Caribbeans to open a political campaign office on Florida Ave, in DC. It was a first taste in localized political realism.

The targeted efforts in the political area buoyed by dynamisms and influence in multiple areas paid off with the Mayoral Executive order establishing the DC Commission on African and Caribbean Affairs in the District of Columbia with Bill 95-166 signed by Mayor Marion Barry on September 12, 1995.

The Mayor appointed equal number of Continental Africans and Caribbeans who either lived or worked in the District of Columbia as commissioners. The Commission on African and Caribbean Affairs was under the DC Office of Diversity. The Director was **Ms Ayo Bryant**.

The chair was designed to rotate between Continental Africans and Caribbeans.

Ms. Hope Steward, a Caribbean, was the first Chairperson of the African and Caribbean Commission. The burst of energies and coordinated synergies, marked an era of progressive activities with increase in the number of African businesses, social innovations and ovations. The African and Caribbean commission mayoral candidate debate was a must attend.

“ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL.” A PHRASE POPULARIZED BY THE LATE TIP O’NEIL, SPEAKER OF THE US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. The POLITICAL REALISM SET THE PLAYBOOK FOR EVENTS IN NEIGHBORING PRINCE GEORGES PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY 2002 AND MONTGOMERY COUNTY 2006, AND NATIONWIDE.

The Continental African community became visible and attractive.

Prof. Yosef Ford (Ethiopian Community Center and frequent media commentator) and adjunct professor, and **Evelyn Joe** (this writer who later became host of a live program on Pacifica Radio WPFW) took the mantra that no noise was nonsense. The Africans should make noise on things, large and small, to define narratives to be heard.

Dr. Chris Nwachukwu (Nigerian) and member of the Commission held breakfast or lunch meetings at his home with Continental Africans leaders.

In September 1997, **Evelyn Joe** organized one of the first community events that brought together community members and leaders from all the five regions of Africa. The hall looked like one-third white. No, these were North Africans. The venue: One Judiciary Square, 441 4th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20001, which was the seat of the Government of the District and Council while the permanent building was being renovated.

The event was cosponsored by the DC Office of Diversity, courtesy the Commission of African and Caribbean Affairs, with exhibits from the Smithsonian Institute.

Mayor Marion Barry, his cabinet, council members, African diplomats, civil society institutions were present. African Americans, like **Paul Pumphrey** with Friends of the Congo, helped. He brought some homemade juice. Hats off! to **Mamadi Diagne** (Guinean) of Amex who had tutored the surging activists on the ways of Washington.

Professor Sulayman Nyang, an international scholar, community mentor, and past chairman of the School of African Studies at Howard University was the honoree of the evening. **Dr. Ambrose Lane** of Pacifica Radio’s *“We Ourselves”* was the Keynote Speaker.

Mayor Marion Barry cut the cake shaped as Africa and joked that he did not want to participate in further "Partition of Africa."

African businesses and civil society patrons started supporting African advocacies.

Mr. Mamadi Diane, regarded and looked upon as connoisseur of DC politics and international player who donated space for meetings on President Clinton campaigning with the Emerging Force, the first nationwide Continental African political action committee to be reckoned with by national political party. Mamadi was a reliable patron of the community. If he was an instructor, he excited attendees with retail politics, complete with how to score politicians.

Dr. Ibrahim Fofanah (Sierra Leone), but working at the Saudi Arabia embassy, financially sponsored major African events. His donations were big. At the time, giving \$5000 was eye-popping. The whole event would be underwritten.

At this time, the African and African American Summit founded by the late Leon Sullivan waxed strongest. It was a biennial event held in Africa (the first five in Francophone countries) with an unhidden agenda: the political and economic clout a reconnected black force can command across the oceans. That was plain talk.

Once more, the Continental Africans were attractive as allies.

This writer had the benefit of her mentor, the late **Dr. Calvin Rolark**, founder of the United Black Fund and the Washington Informer. He worked with the late **Reverend Moon** of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They were active in the African and African American Summit.

As a mentee, Dr. Rolark entertained this writer's ignorance and questions without end. I marveled at his firsthand narrative of Jim Crow. The ignorant part was when I asked a question like: *Doc, this is a black city, explain how it is racist?* He explained that DC is still controlled by the Congress. I stood more informed and spent the next days on research.

"Young lady, are you a princess or what?" **Dr. Rolark - Doc** - as we fondly called him, would ask me, managing to suppress a smile elicited by what

he termed my “unimpressible disposition,” “unbridled confidence” based on my questions and dismissal of social events listening to dignitaries as a waste of my time.

That is not what African folks in the community wanted to know. They wanted me to ask Doc to intervene so that Africans can address DC Council Members.

United Black Fund had some empty offices. I would just go there, occupy one, for African advocacy. The staff didn’t ask me anything and they became used to my presence, even taking my messages at the front desk.

This writer's mom had telephoned Doc Rolark to keep a protective eye on her daughter, the same request she made to Dr. Kofi Agyapong when she visited. She told them I have been interested in advocacy since I was 10-year-old.

After a while, **Doc** realized I was single-minded focused. The issue: Africans were not having their phone calls returned or making appointments with councilmembers.

Doc would intervene. Results happened. The next time, the councilmember’s office understood what the Africans were talking about without communication or expectation gap.

Now, even Dr. Agyapong seemed to partially acknowledge reality. He said, “my niece, ask Dr. Rolark to organize an event with Africans.” United Black Fund was establishing an international branch with the liaison of **Chief Milla**.

With Continental Africans coming together, a communicative African community emerged. Information was quickly disseminated through multiple channels, include ethnic networks.

On-air hosts played invaluable roles: **Ibrahim Kan Jah Bah** of the University of the District of Columbia Radio, **Dr. Kofi Kissi Dompere, Sulyaman Tarawaley, Evelyn Joe, Charlie Dee, and Ms Cece Modupe Fadope** at Pacifica Radio’s WPFW. Activists like **Sam Adewusi** would call a radio program and introduce Africanist thoughts of the day.

Print media was scarcer. **African Profiles** was published by **Professor Chudi Uwazurike** and with local resident **Kwame FitzJohn** serving as editor. An

African weekly published in North Carolina made its way to the Washington Area.

The sense and presence of Continental African identity was unmistakable.

There were African cultural showcases at the French Embassy, the landmark **African Folklife Festival** by the Smithsonian Institute in 1997 highlighted the community; cultural camps for Continental African youths organized by **Mrs. Remi Aluko (Nigerian)** provided an early model of cultural transmission activity.

Kilimanjaro, Chez Nous, Bukom Cafe and **Zanzibar** Nightclub were social mixing and mingling spots to see -- and perhaps to be seen. African professionals came around with nothing in mind other than to dance and listen to unadulterated African music, connect and interact.

International Affairs.

The Africans had arrived, so to speak.

Dr. George Ayittey (American University) was among the pioneers with Free Africa Foundation. This means Continental Africans considered themselves as the authentic voice on US -Africa relations. They challenged paternalistic ideas of others representing voiceless of African people. Historical African Americans who made it their business to do, including Minister Farrakhan of Nation of Islam and Mr. Melvin Foote with Constituency for Africa, were now being challenged.

Dr. Eddie Oparaoji of NADECO, Professor Aluko and others got Africans to start talking about **Abacha, as the Butcher of Abuja**. Susan Rice was the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. She specifically included the Continental African stakeholders in her meetings.

After the tenure of Mayor Marion Barry, Mayor Anthony Williams continued the DC Commission on African and Caribbean Affairs. The rotating chairmanship went to Professor Yosef Ford of the African community. He died in office. A former Ghanaian Ambassador Koby Koomson was subsequently appointed as chairman.

During the Williams administration, the philosophical drive based on grassroots activism morphed to a more businesslike approach on trade missions to Africa.

Conspiratorial theories emerged. It was deemed a betrayal of the idealism that prevailed among the cornerstone pioneers of 1990s. Pioneering activists were no longer engaged or interested as the new comers came without knowing the past.

Notwithstanding the changed level of zeal, the mark was made: The Continental African community and identity were irreversible.

In the fall of 2004, a new African alliance of groups emerged with this writer.

The Ethiopian Community Development Center (ECDC) in Virginia began reaching out ECDC donated space for meeting in DC and had an African service. Its liaison person was **Abdul Kamus**. Evelyn Joe started organizing at the office with weekly meetings.

In 2005, a resurgence was in motion with grassroots focus in the last year of the Anthony Williams' tenure. This time, it was no longer an African and Caribbean enterprise; the Africans went solo.

The Bill to Establish the Office of the African Affairs was sponsored by former **Councilman Vincent Orange (Ward 5)** who submitted the legislation on September 20, 2005. The Bill was cosponsored by **Councilman Kwame Brown (At-Large)**; **Councilman Jim Graham (Ward 1)**, and **Mayor Adrian Fenty** who was then the Councilmember from Ward 4.

Kamus coordinated the testimonies as various sources gave him their lists. **Dr Emmanuel Nwokolo**, then a Director with the DC Cancer department, was very instrumental in providing a directory of Africans working in various capacities in the DC government.

From the 1990s starters, only **Dr. Nyang, Evelyn Joe and Kwame Fitz John** testified.

After an all-day testimony, on a cold Tuesday, February 9, 2009, a group of 8 led by **Abdul Kamu and Evelyn Joe** visited all Council Members' office and explained the need for their support. Old familiar staffers nodded as **Ms Joe** explained the long history dating back to the 1990s. The Bill won unanimous votes from those those present and voting members in two legislative hearings.

Unique to the District of Columbia, an approved Act of the Council must be sent to the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate. The Mayor's Office on African Affairs was finally created by an Act of the DC Council D.C. LAW 16-111 of 2006.

In March 2006, Mayor Anthony Williams signed and established. The Mayor's Office on African Affairs - the first and only designation in the United States to address the welfare of African immigrants and descendants.

Mayor-elect Adrian M. Fenty staffed the Office in 2007, appointing **Ms. Nebiat Solomon** as the first Director. The current acting Director is **Ms. Omoigho Ufomata**.

It does not matter who is Mayor, the Office is legislatively protected and funded.

The events, as they happened, had no precedent at the time. They undoubtedly influenced subsequent experiences in the District of Columbia, the Washington DC Metropolitan Area, and the nation.