

'I discovered Africa in London'

Professor Hakim Adi on London's long association with Africa

'I discovered Africa in London,' wrote Paul Robeson, the famous African American actor and singer who devoted his life to the struggle for African liberation and human rights for all, recalling his experiences in London in the 1920s and 1930s. A visitor to London today might expect to have very similar experiences in Peckham, or throughout many parts of London where Africans and those of African and Caribbean heritage often comprise at least 25% of the entire population. Peckham today is often known as 'Little Lagos,' or 'Little Nigeria', the place to buy Nigerian culinary delicacies and as famous for its association with Hollywood star John Boyega as the tragic death of Damilola Taylor. In much of south London today the population of those from the African continent is the dominant black demographic, outpacing the Caribbean population in the boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham and Greenwich. Indeed, throughout the capital it is a similar picture with growing populations of those from Nigeria, Ghana, Somalia and many other African countries that have outstripped the previously dominant Caribbean population. It is a phenomenon that is causing many to question the dominant narrative which associates all black Londoners with the docking of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948, an event commonly credited as having kicked-off mass post-war immigration from the Caribbean and other parts of the Empire, to the UK.

Before *Empire Windrush*, the African and Caribbean population of London was certainly not as large as it is today but that does not mean it was any less significant, nor is its size any justification for hiding a history which predates the Roman occupation of Britain. There were Africans living and working in London in Shakespeare's time and throughout the following centuries, indeed Shakespeare is supposed to have fallen for an African woman, Lucy Morgan, and celebrated her beauty in his sonnets. In the 18th century, Africans, led by Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana, even formed their own organisation, the Sons of Africa, to contribute to the mass popular campaign to end Britain's trafficking of millions of African men, women and children across the Atlantic. At the end of the 19th century, London was the venue for the first Pan-African conference, organised by African and Caribbean residents to demand human rights for black people throughout the world. It featured music by the famous black British classical composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who was born in Croydon. London's populations of African and Caribbean heritage contributed to both world wars, even when racism and the colour bar in the services made it difficult for them. Others like the Jamaican carpenter Isaac Hall refused to fight. In 1916 as a conscientious objector Hall was sent to Pentonville Prison and tortured but refused to renounce his principles.

War-time service by African and Caribbean volunteers led to many returning to Britain to settle in the period after 1945. Britain's colonial rule produced poverty and no opportunity for higher education, so many others made the journey to Britain to better their lives and those of their families. The most well-known voyage was that made by the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 but many other ships made the journey from the Caribbean before and after that date. They were further encouraged when the newly created NHS began to recruit in the Caribbean in 1949 to be followed by London Transport in 1956. Britain's post-war demand for labour led to tens of thousands of people settling in London from the 1950s onwards. The barbershop/hairdresser became and remains one of the most visible signs of this settlement

which was established in different parts of London – Brixton, Croydon, Peckham, as well as Harlesden, Hackney, Notting Hill, Paddington.

The continental African population of London has arrived in the capital for a variety of reasons. Nigerians and Ghanaians were sojourning in the capital in the 1950s and 1960s, drawn by the need to gain qualifications or working in such sectors as the National Health Service. Some had arrived much earlier and were amongst those who helped Paul Robeson ‘discover’ Africa in the 1920s and 1930s. In that era, Robeson became the patron of the West African Students’ Union (WASU) which had been founded in 1925 to campaign for the rights of Africans in Britain’s colonies, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Gambia, and to campaign against the infamous colour bar in Britain. At that time racism was legal in Britain and Africans might be barred from hotels and public houses and denied employment. Even African women training as nurses sometimes found it difficult to secure positions in London’s hospitals. The WASU, therefore established its own hostel in Camden Town, which also provided the capital’s first African restaurant, amongst other things adopting and adapting ground rice for Nigerian culinary purposes. The WASU also provided one of the first modern African barbers.

In those days, Peckham was known as the place of residence of Dr Harold Moody, a Jamaican physician, and the headquarters of the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), of which he was president. Whereas the WASU united West Africans, the LCP’s membership included those from the Caribbean as well. Moody campaigned on behalf of nurses and other victims of the colour bar just as the WASU did. Such was the situation facing London’s African and Caribbean population at that time, a population that contained students and professionals but many others who existed as seafarers, or earned a living as best they could.

Of course, Africans were also settling in London during this period pulled and pushed by the same factors as those from the Caribbean. The numbers were not as large but thousands came to study with the aim of soon returning home but then remained. Others came to seek employment, before the 1962 Immigration Act all colonial subjects were entitled to British citizenship and residence. Even after that many Africans came as refugees and asylum seekers following civil wars in Nigeria in the 1960s and Somalia later, as well as other conflicts in DR Congo, Zimbabwe and Eritrea in the last decades of the 20th century. Still others were directly recruited especially by the NHS which initiated a programme for this purpose in the mid-1990s. By the start of this millennium the largest African communities originated from Nigeria, Ghana, Somalia and Zimbabwe, located particularly in South London but also in boroughs such as Newham, Hackney, Brent and more recently Barking and Dagenham.

Although there are distinct African and Caribbean communities there is also a common ‘Black’ experience based on living in London and increasingly from being born and growing up in London to parents who may also be Londoners. The barbershop/hairdresser is another of those common experiences, along with remittances, holidays ‘back home’ and increasing familiarity with what might be described as Pan-African cuisine and, of course music, from Highlife and Calypso in the 1950s to Reggae and the more recent Afrobeat. It is now increasingly common to find young Nigerians taking Congolese partners, Sierra Leoneans with Jamaicans and every other Pan-African combination. The fluidity of Afropolitanism, we are told, is in vogue. Yet, as at the start of the 20th century and long before, it is often the common problems facing all those of African descent – poverty, racism, eurocentrism, neo-

colonialism – and their solution, that create the conditions for the most passionate discussions, whether in the barber’s or elsewhere.