WEST AFRICAN CULTURAL INFLUENCES

This series is dedicated to Dr. Ray Costello, the foremost historian of Black Liverpool

"British explorer David Livingstone suggested colonialism should be described by the "three C's" - Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation. It may be more accurate to describe it with the "three Ps" - Profit, Plunder and Prestige" - *Professor Adekeye Adebajo, University of Pretoria, South Africa*

ANTI-AFRICAN RACISM IN BRITAIN

At the start of the 1970s, a confident public embrace of African culture and identity was not common in Liverpool 8, and for many Liverpool-born Black people the most common attitude towards Africa and Africans was rejection, ambivalence or indifference.

Positive attitudes towards Africa could only be found among families with immediate origins in Africa, including their children, and some L8 community notables and elders (like Dorothy Kuya and Sandra Antigha). There were clues that suggested a more positive embrace of African identity would emerge, like the Prinny Avenue African nightclubs with their splattering of African music, and the African names of local families. There was also African food, artifacts, ornaments, and cloth in the community.

This troublesome frame of mind is hardly surprising given the endless torrent of anti-African racism which had pervaded British society for centuries and which continued into the 1970s and beyond.

Clockwise from top left: *Sparky Comic*, *Tin Tin in the Congo*, *Zulu* and *Tarzan the Apeman*

Television shows like *The Black and White Minstrels* and *Till Death do Us Part*, films like *Zulu* and *Tarzan the Apeman* and comic books like *Sparky* and *Tin Tin*, with stories of white missionaries being eaten in pots by so-called African cannibals.

Newspapers often favored European imperialist control of Africa, ignored the atrocities of apartheid regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa, and mispresented the leaders of Black liberation like Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and Robert Mugabe.

Museums in Liverpool were chock-full with images of African savages - men with gigantic red lips and bones in their noses, women with naked breasts and raggedy hair. No wonder one of Africa's most celebrated musicians, Fela Kuti, protested "Teacher don't teach me nonsense" and reggae superstar Bob Marley urged each of us to "emancipate yourself from mental slavery".

AFRICAN HERITAGE PROMOTED BY REGGAE AND RASTAFARI

As the 1980s arrived, L8 community attitudes began to show greater appreciation of Africa and African culture; and the 1990s saw the Black population with immediate African origins increase significantly, in Liverpool and across the nation. Transnational cultural flows increased in volume and influence, and they arrived via a number of overlapping currents. Individuals, groups and organisations in L8 embraced Africa and Africans, past and present, more than ever before. There was an insatiable hunger for Blackness and Afrocentric perspectives. These flows coincided with the unceremonious rejection of the increasingly despised half-caste identity, and a greater embrace of an African identity.

Surprisingly, the first giant wave of positive information about the multiple cultures of Africa, came not from the continent itself but from across the Atlantic, from Jamaica, in the form of reggae music and Rastafari.

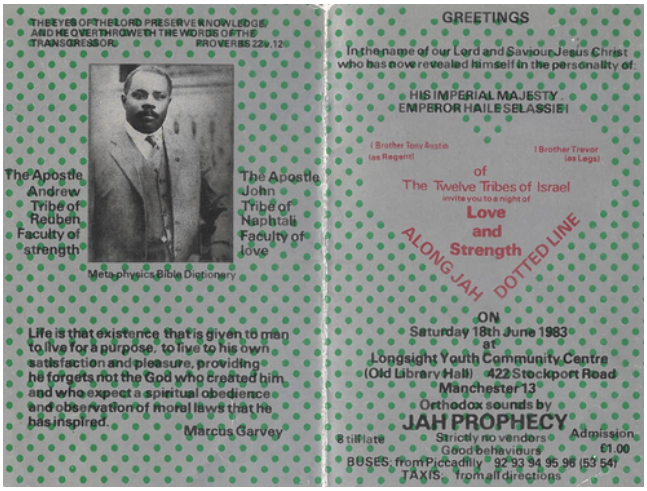
In reggae music lyrics, instead of uncivilised, savage, and subservient Africans we learnt about leaders like Shaka Zulu, and Queen Nzinga. Ethiopia was at the forefront, especially His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

We discovered the glory and achievements of African civilisations like Mali, Ghana, Benin, Nubia and Kush. We uncovered information about magnificent monuments, palaces, and architecture from the pyramids of Egypt to the city of Great Zimbabwe.

At that time few people in L8 had ever heard about any of these marvels; now, no one will ever forget them. Africa was presented symbolically as our natural homeland, a place to which Black people could escape from the racism, violence and abuse of Western societies (Babylon).

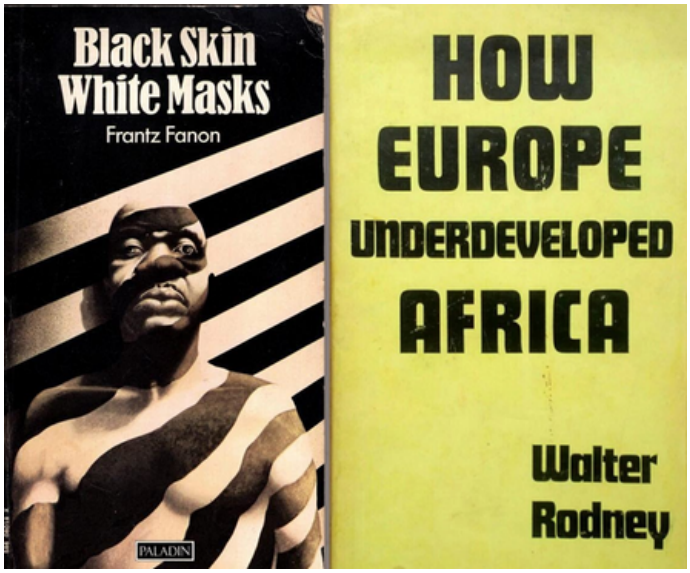
We also got critical information about ongoing armed liberation struggles in South Africa, Rhodesia, and in Mozambique and Angola. And we heard the names of Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Robert Mugabe, about MPLA (the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique). **It was the first real antidote to the centuries of racist diatribes against Africa and Africans inflicted on the people of L8 by British society and culture.**

Far more information was shared by L8 Rastafarians at meetings, dances, events, and performances, and in Rasta reasoning sessions (meetings to explore issues relating to Africa and the diaspora, including Britain).



Twelve Tribes Card, Manchester 1983

They took place in the Rialto community centre, the Charles Wootton Centre, the Methodist and in people's homes. L8 residents went to larger meetings in one of the Twelve Tribes Headquarters in Manchester, (there was another Headquarters in London) where they met with senior Rastafarians from Jamaica and (eventually), members of His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie's family. Rastafari led people to magazines, books, articles and poetry, to books like *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by Walter Rodney and *Black Skin White Masks* by Franz Fanon.



How Europe Underdeveloped Africa by Walter Rodney and *Black Skin White Masks* by Franz Fanon.

L8 residents began to produce their own knowledge, in innovative and creative ways. For example, "Third World Promotions" (TWP), which began in the early 1980s, rapidly changed its name to "World Promotions" in acknowledgment that Africa was the first world, not, as the West would defame it, the third world.

It's true that reggae and Rastafari sometimes delivered romantic and utopian portrayals of Africa, as a land of harmony, equality and justice. Several male artists encouraged women to embrace so-called traditional roles of responsibility for the family and children, and modest dress that covered their bodies and hair. Ideas that many women in L8 regarded as retrograde. And there were always more male artists than female, and far more songs about men's struggles than there were by women or about women's struggles.

But women did not accept such messages uncritically, they did not remain silent in the face of patriarchy, and they were not invisible or one-dimensional.

We began to appreciate the Prinny Avenue African nightclubs more, the memories they evoked, and the African music they played, including critical songs like *Colonial Mentality* by Fela Kuti, and the mesmerising refrain of *Sweet Mother* by Prince Nico Mbarga.

People began to research their own family histories back to Africa. L8 resident Joe Myers composed a booklet called *Liberians in Britain* to document the history of Kru seamen in the city and beyond. First-hand accounts and information continued to be shared by residents and visitors from and to Africa, as well as by visitors from the United States, like educators Molefi Asante and Jan Carew, described in the previous article.

THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS

Dorothy Kuya continued to promote Africa, as she had done all her life, from her membership of the Colonial People's Defence Association in the 1950s, her work with Bernie Grant on reparations and with the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery in the 1990s (and much later on, with the International Slavery Museum). Back in the 1950s, she was a mentee of Ludwig Hesse, a Liverpool resident himself, originally from Ghana - and a dedicated pan-Africanist.

Sandra Adiaha Antigha

Far less well-known than Dorothy, but in many ways equally important, was Sandra Adiaha Antigha. Sandra was a person with deep humanity and compassion, someone who put people - especially the vulnerable - at ease. She played an important role in securing the funding to establish the Adult Education Centre in 1974 (which was later renamed the Charles Wootton Centre). L8 resident and poet/writer Carlene Montoute who worked for the Community Relations Council before working closely with Sandra for several years at the Adult Education Centre paid tribute to her in an unpublished piece of writing called *Inspirational Women*.

Sandra relocated to London in the 1980s and in 1996 became the first Director of the newly formed Hackney Council for Voluntary Service (CVS). A number of people in Liverpool - including Carlene and myself - are working to make sure there is better recognition in the community of Sandra's legacy.

Organisations and individuals encouraged people in L8 to read historians of Africa, like Ivan Van Sertima, novelists like Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta, and decolonial analysts like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Short courses about Africa were offered. Black women in organisations like Liverpool Black Sisters highlighted the need to understand women's roles in every aspect of African history and culture, especially as leaders and community builders. **These books and courses humanised and personalised Africans in ways that Liverpool schools had never done.**

As part of these developments, African women and men, born and raised in African nations, brought firsthand experiences, knowledge and insight, including people from West Africa like Chief Angus Chukuemeka, Chief Ben Agwuna, Dr. Tunde Zack Williams, and from South Africa like Dr. Protasia Torkington, and Shirley Mashiane-Talbot.

African music and artists - what was called "world music" back then - became far more popular in Britain over the decades, including The Festac Festival that took place in Lagos in 1977, and the Womad festival (World of Music, Arts and Dance), in England in 1980.

Liverpool's own African Oyé music festival began in Liverpool in 1992 and became larger over time. These happened alongside massive multi-racial demonstrations against apartheid in the city centre, and celebrations in L8 when Rhodesia was forced to end its white supremacist regime and was renamed Zimbabwe.

One of the most active campaigners against apartheid – and many other racist issues – was Sonia Bassey, whose creative talents led to the "L8 Against Apartheid" flag design. Celebrations also happened when Bob Marley played live at the independence celebration in Harare in April 1980; and when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, and became president of South Africa several years later.

L8 Against Apartheid flag

FOUR IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS

Four developments that I explore in detail in my book, ***Black Liverpool. "the real thing"*** dramatically advanced the progressive decolonisation of our minds.

These four developments reveal how L8 residents shifted from being simply beneficiaries of knowledge on African culture, to becoming active creators, innovators and performers of African culture. The first was the inspiring African Liberation Day (ALD) activities that began in Nottingham in 1975, and took place in May each year, including one event in Liverpool in 1976.

ALD brought people of African origin together, with speakers, writers, performers and freedom fighters from liberation struggles in the continent itself, to address the struggles for national independence in those nations in Africa still subject to neo-colonial rule. The event in Birmingham in 1977 is the one most remembered in L8.

African Liberation Day: photo by Vanley Burke

The second was the establishment in 1982 of the Steve Biko Housing Association (SBHA), (initially named Liverpool 8 Housing Association). Steve Biko was of course a life-long African nationalist and anti-apartheid activist in South Africa who was banned by the apartheid state, and then arrested and brutally beaten to death in 1977. He was known world-wide and inspired millions. In 1992 SBHA was officially opened by Nontsikelelo Biko (Steve Biko's widow).

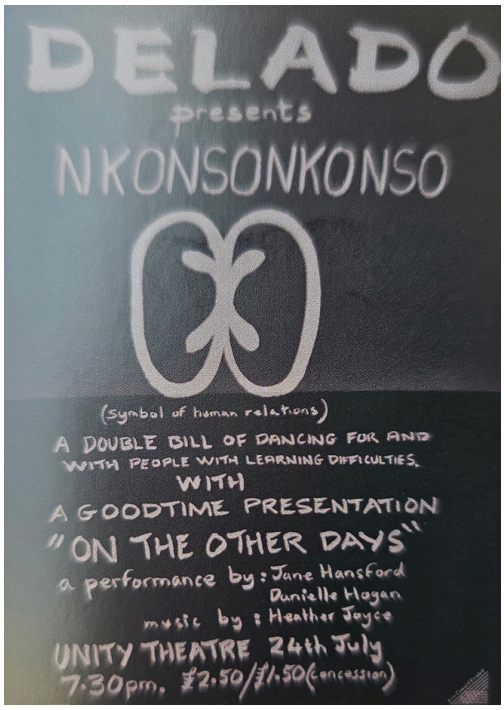
Louis Julienne, Ray Quarless and a resident on the day that Steve Biko Close opened, June 1992.

SBHA worked to combat the ages-long marginalisation of Black people's housing needs - especially the Black elderly - and to honor a freedom fighter for Black liberation. SBHA was the brainchild of Ray Quarless, himself born and raised in L1, member of a Liverpool family of mixed Black and white origins dating back to the 1800s, he was active in L8 and throughout the city. Ray came up with the idea, and swam steadfastly against the high tide of disbelief held by colleagues in the housing sector, doubtful that naming an association in Liverpool after such a radical Black man would be tolerated by the powers that be.

Undeterred, he found a way to establish contact with Steve Biko's widow, made the solo trip in 1991 to South Africa - first to Cape Town, then to East London and finally to King William's Town - to meet Mrs. Biko and seek permission to use Biko's name. It's an absorbing story of determination and perseverance, the details of which I share in my book.

The third was the founding of The Delado African Drum and Dance Company (known locally and affectionately as Delado), which emerged after the 1981 uprising, and brought African dance, performance, culture and spirituality to L8. Delado began after several African dancers began an unexpected temporary stay in Liverpool - and brought their knowledge, experience and skills to L8.

Delado held workshops and practice sessions in the Rialto, attracting huge number of youth of all colours from across the neighbourhood. They also held classes on how to build drums from scratch, and the women got involved in classes making African costumes, including tops and grass skirts. For people of African origin Delado gave its members the greatest sense of pride in themselves and in being African. Delado performed in the city, the region and across the nation, bringing music and culture that incorporated scouse identity (for example, in the form of accent and attitude) into African dance, drumming, dress and performance. This was often done with a different spin to other African dance groups across the country, all to the surprise and gratitude of their audiences.



Delado event poster

The fourth was the opening of the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery (TSG) in the Merseyside Maritime Museum in 1994, which was the precursor to the International Slavery Museum (ISM) which opened in 2007. The TSG began in controversy and ended in relative success. The TSG had originally intended a small gallery with a narrow focus on the so-called slave trade, an approach that was summarily rejected as far too narrow by many in the L8 community. Instead, the active involvement of Black people in the process led the TSG to expand coverage to include Africa before European invasion, as well as sections on the legacies of slavery, including how the Black community faced racism throughout the twentieth-century.

This was the city's first and most extensive coverage of Africa, slavery and its legacies, including the role of Liverpool. Before the TSG, when it came to representing Black people, Liverpool museums had nothing to be proud of; after the TSG, they became one of the leaders in sharing information and knowledge of Africa and the African diaspora, again with a specific focus on Liverpool.

By the end of the 1990s, TSG had become the leading mainstream institution in Liverpool disseminating more accurate, more inclusive and more comprehensive information on Africa and the diaspora - and the Black community in Liverpool - than ever before.

The Merseyside African Council (MAC) (chaired at the time by Chief Chukuemeka) ensured that Africa was foregrounded in the TSG - before, during and after slavery. The decisive role that the MAC played is not well known and has not been made clear in publications so far. Nor has the struggle over the representation in museums of Black women as victims of British imperialism and also as agents of resistance and advocates of human dignity been told in full. These stories are elaborated in detail in **Black Liverpool. "the real thing".** I describe the ways in which the MAC argued its case, and how they ensured that several African-born and raised scholars were selected as guest curators. And I describe the advocacy of Black women for their priorities. As a result, TSG was fundamentally changed and improved.

Like other developments described in these articles**, the embrace of Africa, Black culture and a Black identity was not free from contention.** Tensions around inter-racial dating and marriage (especially Black men and white women) and words of condescension and contempt expressed about people of mixed origins led to some nasty confrontations during ALD in Liverpool. And significant numbers of L8 residents, especially Black women, strongly opposed the initial platform of items proposed for the TSG arguing that in light of the atrocities committed against Africans in general, and women in particular, and in light of Liverpool museums' long discriminatory treatment against L8 residents, the gallery should not go ahead. Black women played a decisive role in transforming the gallery. We live with these legacies.

More generally, some commentators questioned why people of mixed origins in L8, whose families dated back decades, generations and even centuries, should care so much about Africa; and why some of us wanted to "return to Africa".

Truth is, we didn't expect we would get a perfect picture of Africa, and didn't expect we would all go to Africa. But we needed to decolonise our minds from the grossly one-sided caricature of Africa that had been shaped in Liverpool schools and press, primarily to meet the needs of the British Empire. In this regard, the words of Marcus Garvey are most fitting:

"It is not our intention or purpose to send all Negroes back to Africa... It is the decision of the Negro to make Africa a nation to which the Negroes of the world can look for help and support, moral and physical, when ill-treated or abused for being Negroes"
- Marcus Garvey

SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

AUTHOR PROFILE

Stephen Small, PhD, is a Professor of the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley, a role he began in January 2025 after he retired from teaching. Prior to that he taught in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies since 1995. He was Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (June 2020 to January 2025). He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe. As a professor he researched the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. Since retirement he mainly works on legacies of British imperialism, with a particular focus on Liverpool. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his MS.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979).

His most recent book is ***In the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana,*** 2023. Before that he published ***20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe***, January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: **Black Liverpool "The real thing". West African, West Indian and Afro-American culture at the end of the 20th century**, and will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2026.

Stephen was born and raised in Liverpool 8, in the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Transatlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum which opened in 1994 (and which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).

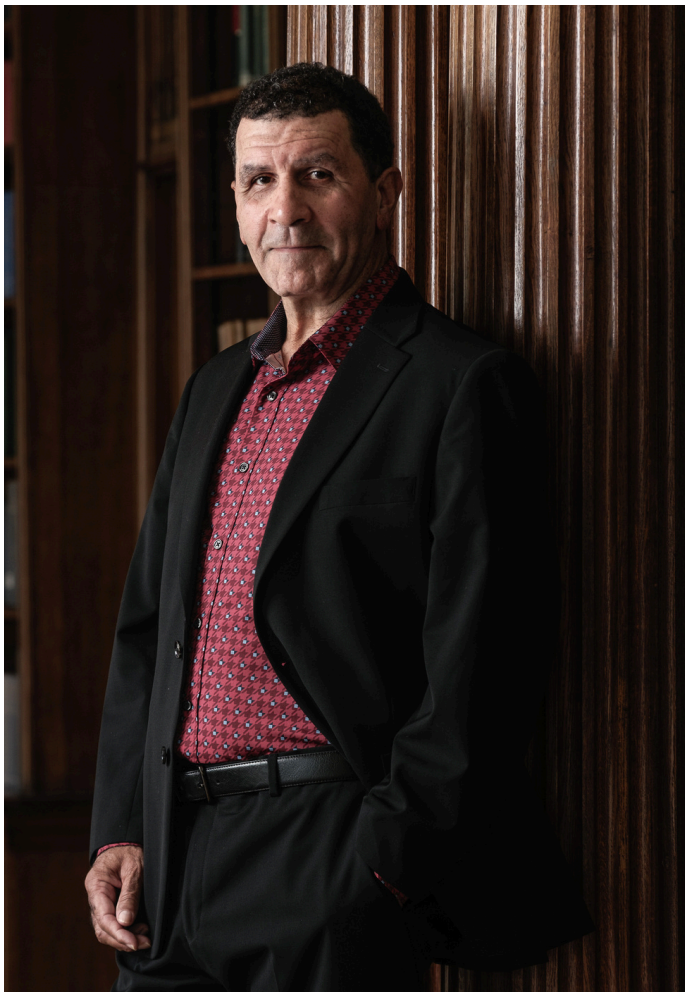


Photo credit to Ean Flanders