

## IN CONVERSATION WITH. . .

Professor Esi Sutherland-Addy is Associate Professor in the Language, Literature and Drama Section at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. She has served in two ministerial positions, as Deputy Minister for Culture and Tourism, and Higher Education (1986 & 1986-1993 respectively). *CJAS* Editor-in-Chief speaks with Professor Sutherland-Addy below to reflect on her life, cultural activism and African-African Diasporan relationships.

**CJAS:** Welcome to *CJAS* and this important conversation about the year of return. Before we go into that, however, could you please tell us a little bit about yourself: your areas of research interest, and family background. We know you are a well-known academic and cultural activist, but you also have two famous parents, a quintessential Pan-African couple.

**ESA:** It's a privilege to be featured in this rather special manner in the *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*. Yes I am one of three siblings<sup>1</sup> born to two rather extraordinary personalities: Bill Sutherland, an African American social worker and civil rights activist who chose to follow his Pan-African aspirations on the African continent and Efua Sutherland, an educationist, writer and cultural activist born in the land that eventually became known as Ghana, and who became well known as a leading Pan-Africanist creative. The interests and activities of both our parents certainly influenced us in various ways. Perhaps two of these are a consciousness of the power of creativity to influence social development and a critical engagement with Africa. My brother Ralph Sutherland is an architect renowned for reflecting African aesthetics in his designs and a Christian leader with a passion for ethical governance. My sister Amowi Sutherland Phillips, professionally a lawyer and lecturer living in the United States is dedicated to establishing Africa's place in the contemporary world of creative activism and inter-cultural dialogue. In my own case, I have ended up in a lifelong intellectual career both public and academic dedicated to matters African, and a Pan-Africanist activist working mainly in the areas of culture, gender, education, and human rights.

**CJAS:** Growing up, was this Pan-African identity something that you were aware of, and how do you think this influenced your own intellectual work and creative thinking

**ESA:** I guess my awareness of a Pan-African identity was infused into my upbringing. For example, our home became a meeting place for personalities from the African Diaspora. Many repatriated persons of African descent also became family friends.

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Sutherland, Architect and Christian Leader. Amowi Sutherland Phillips, Lawyer, Educationist, Child Rights and Environmental Activist.

The pioneering dentists Bobby and Sara Lee and their children were perhaps the closest we were privileged to listen to and observe as flies on the wall in the midst of hearty conversations while we went back and forth running errands or sitting a discreet distance away. While we were not immediately aware of the true import of the issues being discussed, we were privy to informal Pan Africanist literary and political discourses. A listing of personalities who were attempting to remake the African the narrative through the salons, one on one discussions, lunches, and evening drinks sessions could be quite long. Just a few of these are Langston Hughes, Morriseau Leroi Wole Soyinka, Kwabena Nketia, Maya Angelou, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ngugi Wa Thiong' o Kamau Brathwaite, Michael Dei-Anang and Nana Kobina Nketsia IV. Every now and then, courtesy calls were made by freedom fighters who had become leading political figures such as Julius Nyerere.

I must certainly have also been influenced by the wide range of African theatre and especially playwrights whose works were regularly workshopped and produced at the Ghana Drama Studio. Also, the School of Performing Arts or School of Music and Drama as it was formerly named, was just being incubated at the Institute of African Studies and Efu Sutherland was deeply involved in this process. The School regularly hosted professionals from around the world including the African Diaspora. Professors Joel Adedeji and students from Ghana and around Africa patronised the School's programmes and became proteges of Efu Sutherland. Some very influential Pan-Africanist dramatists such as Mapopa Mtonga of Zambia and Mohamed Ben Abdallah of Ghana are among these. Being around workshops, rehearsals and editorial sessions involving the emerging performing arts scene was a privilege especially as other fields such as choral music (Ephraim Amu) Neo-African classicals (Nketia, Nayo) Neo-African Dance (Mawere Opoku) were also being developed in tandem. Then there were research trips all over Ghana to festivals, ceremonial, and artistic events where I was exposed to Efu Sutherland's efforts to develop a rigorous ethnography of drama in Ghanaian Society. While she worked her way into the annals of Pan-African literary and theatrical history, I also gained the principles, enthusiasm, and exposure for my future activities in African arts, culture, and development.

**CJAS:** You have been heavily involved with Panafest, can you tell us a little about this important festival's history, journey and relevance today.

PANAFEST emerged as an interpretation of a memo written by my mother in the early 1980s in which she suggested that a Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival physically set in and around the Cape Coast 'Castle' would act as a vehicle for exorcising the trauma of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and paving the way for Africans on the continent and those living in the Diaspora to work their

way back towards reconciliation and reunification. She subscribed to the view that the dysfunctionality being experienced by post-independent Africa is because Africans had not achieved decolonisation, not confronted the contradictions of its oppressive effects. Sutherland's memo was taken up by a succession of Central Regional Ministers starting with Ato Austin at the time and eventually the Minister responsible for Culture Mohamed Ben Abdallah. It took roughly eight years to develop a policy and workplan for a festival based on the memo. The eventual event was first held in December 1992. It has over time been expanded way beyond Sutherland's original vision to include a symbolic boat ride (Journey of Return), from the Door of No Return at Cape Coast 'Castle' to Elmina; an Akwaaba Ceremony by the traditional leaders and people of Elmina, an opening durbar, musical concerts, theatre and dance performances, a colloquium with days dedicated to women and children, an expo, and a Reverential Night. The main festival venue has been the Cape Coast-Elmina area, but aspects have been rolled out in Accra and Kumasi, as well as along the Slave Route from Northern Ghana.

PANAFEST hit a management snag and financial crunch around 1995 when it became clear that the Government of Ghana was actively considering shutting down the festival. Some individuals involved in its inception and management and who were no longer officers of state decided to establish the PANAFEST Foundation to save the festival. These include Dr. Abdallah and Mr. Kojo Yankah. The Foundation has had a touch and go relationship with Government, having to negotiate changing regimes with differing priorities. On the whole, however, government has ended up partnering the Foundation and the chiefs and people of the Central Region to organise the festival. While the festival has had a chequered history, it has been held consistently for 27 years. I got involved directly with the PANAFEST Foundation in 2008.

Regarding the relevance of PANAFEST today, it offers Ghana the opportunity to enhance its role carved out from the time of independence as the home of Pan-Africanism on the African continent. Ghana has the doubtful privilege of being a site from which enslaved Africans were taken from the continent in very large numbers while also being the first country to achieve independence from colonialism. It appears that there is a renewed consciousness of an African identity by people of African descent living in the Western world. This has led to a search for roots and a home base from which to relate concretely with shaping the continent in fulfilment of a yearning not only to belong but also to build Africa.

**CJAS:** Where do you see gender issues and women's place within the Pan-African agenda?

**ESA:** The Pan-African agenda can at one level be said to have been remiss in making gender a visible rallying point for thought and activism. One might raise the question of the recognition of the roles of women in the resistance to enslavement and oppression. These roles have not been sufficiently recognised or analysed. What did it take for women to poison the food of their slave masters or to act as messengers and couriers? Women recognised for their heroism in this centuries-long narrative of rebellion are few and far between. We can recognise Queen Nzingha of the Ndongo who mounted a fierce resistance against the Portuguese in the 1620s, while in Brazil Princess Acqualtune captured in the Congo successfully established an independent African community called the Quilombo de Subupura in the 1650s. From the 18<sup>th</sup> Century we can recognise the famous freedom fighter, Nanny, operating in the hills of Jamaica in the 1730s. Harriet Tubman's courageous rescuing of enslaved persons from plantations in the American South in the 1830s is recognised. It is, however, often acknowledged today that personalities like Amy Jacques Garvey, wife of Marcus Garvey, were not given their due regarding their contribution to the twentieth century pan-Africanist struggle when it came into its own in the twentieth century.

There are also the questions of women's experiences in the struggle. For example, rather strong-worded pieces by activists, scholars and poets express the anguish of women being brow beaten into thinking that raising any matters of misogyny, for example, is tantamount to betraying the struggle for African emancipation. One African-American activist among many others who has consistently spoken about these sensitive matters is Barbara Smith.

There is certainly something to be said for women placing themselves, their experiences and aspirations on the agenda. A few examples of how women represent the female point of view within a pan-Africanist paradigm through literature should be of interest. Writers such as Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall have appropriated mythologies which depict restless descendants of enslaved Africans only finding peace when they embrace their roots. In *Song of Solomon*, for example, Toni Morrison references the belief that upon death, enslaved Africans could finally fly back home to Africa.

Another set of questions are raised in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, placed side by side with Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* in which re-connections between Africans born in Diaspora and continental Africans are examined. In both plays, highly educated men born on the continent wish to form relationships with African American women. In the former, Beneathea considers leaving the United States to live in Nigeria with Asagai, her Pan-Africanist suitor, but how practical would it be? Ama Ata Aidoo actually makes marriage and return

to the continent happen for Ato and Eulalie. However, Ato for all his Western education and exposure fails miserably at mediating the culture clash which erupts between his wife and his birth family. It takes his so-called illiterate mother to circumvent him and reach out directly to Eulalie. It would appear from these writers that men may not have the backbone to offer the leadership required to bring the Global African Family together.

Pan-African activism by women takes many different forms. The world of literary publication provides exemplary Pan-African endeavours by women among which are Margaret Busby's pioneering publishing house Allison and Busby. She also compiled the first international anthology of literary works by women of African descent. *Daughters of Africa* (1992) has happily been followed by its sequel *New Daughters of Africa* (2019). It is worth bringing up at least one representative of the new generation of women publishers. Bibi Bakari-Yusuf through her Cassava Republic has won the trust of millennial writers such as Nnedi Okorafor and Ayesha Haruna Attah.

I have stuck to the area of literature and the unearthing and projection of women's voices but in all spheres of Pan-Africanist concern a full picture must include the gender perspective. This means talking about women's involvement in the history of struggle, in politics, activism in civil society etc where these activities have been undertaken from a Pan-Africanist perspective. However, to conclude, let me evoke the unfolding case of Dr. Arikana Chihombori Quao which to me vividly exemplifies the struggle which women continue to wage to speak up on behalf of their people. Dr. Chiombori Quao, Pan-Africanist medical doctor, entrepreneur and philanthropist has been serving as the African Union Ambassador in Washington DC. She is a fiery and fearless orator. She has consistently called out African leadership for abandoning the Pan-African Agenda and for cowering in the face of neo-colonialism. It appears that she is paying the price for it as she has been summarily dismissed after a particularly trenchant analysis of the relationship between France and its ex-colonies. Sorry this has been a pretty long answer but there is so much to say on this matter!

**CJAS:** Thank you very much. These insights are fascinating. Let's move on to the anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia. This sad, painful and destructive event is a scar on human history that was marked by remembrances all over the world. Some have argued that this is important. Others have complained that such a sordid spot on humanity's history should not be celebrated. What are your views?

**ESA:** Yes, I have heard these arguments. I happen to believe that African people have been subjected to unspeakable horrors through the period of enslavement

especially in the past half a millennium, but more importantly that these horrors continue to affect the wellbeing of contemporary Africans at home and in the diaspora on a daily basis. I am convinced that seeking to bury this history also buries a hugely important aspect of self-knowledge involving the resilience of indigenous culture, contributions to global culture and technology etc. This to my mind only leads to a weakening of the sense of self-worth and unity which are critical to improving the prospects of African peoples and communities. Right, having had a rant on this, let me say, therefore, that there will be many vivid moments of significance in the lived experiences of Africans as this history of enslavement unfolded which must be highlighted, remembered and commemorated rather than celebrated. Indeed, this is a historical narrative which must be pieced together as fully as possible and never watered down or forgotten, however uncomfortable this may seem. It does not mean that any other period of the history whether prior to or subsequent to 1619 is being suppressed. Rather, the narrative is being expanded and enriched so that it grows much closer to the truth than it has been to date. One of the expected outcomes of this commemoration is the opportunity to place in the limelight the tremendous contributions which enslaved persons have made to the building of America. As mentioned above, there are so many more ancestral experiences which must be recounted to fill in the gaps in our historical narrative and, perhaps more importantly, assist us to understand the contemporary situation of African people.

**CJAS:** Let's bring this closer to home. The [Year of Return](#) a Ghana is a collaborative project under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture together with the Office of Diaspora Affairs at the Office of the President, the PANAFEST foundation and the Adinkra Group of the USA. Could you tell us a little bit more about each of these groups, their role in this collaboration, and why you think this project is an important one.

**ESA:** As I indicated earlier the ministerial body responsible for culture was the one that had responsibility for organising PANAFEST which commenced about 27 years ago. By the time it was decided that Ghana should celebrate Emancipation Day in tandem with the Caribbean countries some 21 years ago, the sectors of culture and tourism had been brought together under one ministry. I also indicated that the PANAFEST Foundation had been established in the late 1990s, in order to provide urgent support to a floundering cultural event which was gaining an imprint around the Pan-African world but was subject to the vicissitudes of long term versus a short term national political strategy. In 2018 the governmental agencies principally responsible for organising Emancipation Day and the PANAFEST Foundation spearheading the organisation of PANAFEST, decided to strengthen their collaboration in order to ensure that

the two festivals could provide an enhanced experience of the Pan-African heritage which had been slowly building up over the years. The Ministry designated the Ghana Tourism Authority, the national implementing agency for tourism policy, to work with the Foundation. Clearly there would be two perspectives, one being the promotion of Ghana as the site for a healing of the wounds created by historical trauma while celebrating the achievement and diverse cultures created by African peoples and creating a platform for visionary thinking. The other perspective would be looking at the Pan-African heritage of Ghana as a tourism product to be enhanced and marketed to African communities around the world.

The PANAFEST Foundation had decided to link the theme of the 2019 edition of the festival to the successful campaign of the Congressional Black Caucus of the United States and other African American activists to get the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the recorded landing of 20 enslaved Africans in Virginia recognised legislatively (H.R.124 2-115). Again, the attention of the Board had been drawn to the fact that a number of African American associations including the Akwaaba African Cultural Edutainment Resource and Consulting Group had decided to bring the commemoration to Ghana. Also, the Office of Diaspora Affairs (the organ established at the Office of the President to bring the diaspora into the scope of national development) was to organise the Homecoming event. It became obvious to the GTA and the Foundation that in the first place, the official Ghanaian events (PANAFEST, Emancipation Day and the Homecoming) should be more tightly coordinated. Secondly the heightened interest among religious, cultural, and activist organisations from the African Diaspora and particularly in the United States was not only aimed at visiting the country but also at organising special heritage tours, concerts, conferences, and religious conventions. Clearly this would also have to be well coordinated and projected in order to both draw attention to the main Pan-Africanist events organised in Ghana and to ensure that proposed activities to be organised by various groups would be rolled out in an orderly fashion.

The Year of Return was a concept which the President of Ghana promoted with growing passion as his invitation to diaspora communities especially in the Americas resonated on several levels. One was the recall that Ghana had been the home of many an enslaved African, and the last shore from which persons from within and beyond the current borders of Ghana had been brought to, and forcibly separated from the continent of Africa. The second was the fact that Ghana was not only the first country south of the Sahara to win its independence from colonial rule through an anti-colonial struggle with overtly Pan-Africanist aspirations, but consciously opened its doors to other African descended persons struggling for freedom. In addition to these legacies was the fact that with all its ups and downs

contemporary Ghana continues to represent a sense of stability and progress in Africa. The idea of an official invitation to persons of African descent to return and make peace with a welcoming homeland seemed to be one which met a felt need.

The concept of the Year of Return took on a life of its own and was interpreted in different ways by different entities, communities, and individuals. This led to a whirring kaleidoscope of activities and a multifaceted conversation conveying familiar emotions. Perhaps it would be fair to state that the heightened emotions were felt to a far greater extent among Diasporans than among Ghanaians resident in the country. While the communities which experienced PANAFEST, Emancipation Day, the Homecoming as well as the many events felt the impact of the Year of Return, there was a thread running through public opinion for much of 2019 that the Year of Return was not for Ghanaians.

**CJAS:** Some have argued that this effort by Ghanaians simply exploits the pain of African Americans, and displaced Africans more generally, for commercial gain. What would you say to this, and can you share some of the important work done by contemporary Ghanaians, as well as our forebears, to recognise the pain of slavery and bring about healing.

**ESA:** I am very much aware of the argument that The Year of Return was a commercial gimmick backed up by a slick marketing campaign to exploit the tourism potential of the African diaspora. There are many observations one could make. The first is that like many heritage sites around the world, it cannot be denied that a particular community with a close attachment to such sites will, if properly approached, visit the site in large numbers to renew their links and experience a cathartic moment. It is, however, obvious that these visitations will necessarily involve elements like boarding and lodging, transportation, visitation fees, purchase of artifacts etc which feed into tourism as an economic sector. For the agencies in charge of the tourism sector, it became necessary for them to provide a sound economic justification for diverting resources and national attention towards this highly specialised area as this was not necessarily obvious to sections of government and the critical public. The argument was thus made that this period had drawn intense positive attention to Ghana in the international media, which the state could never have paid for. Secondly, an analysis was made of the dividends to different aspects of the national and local economy. Even though there is evidence that various officials sought to put this out as one benefit emanating from a much greater non-monetary benefit, a lot was made of it in the press. The jury is out as to whether the balance between the two perspectives could have been better presented.



Now to the second part of the question: I may have partially provided my thoughts already but let me pick on a few token points: one could go back to the history of resistance led by the Akan or Kromantse people, as they were commonly called in the Caribbean. For example, in the late 1720s to the 1730s Nanny and her brothers Accompong (Akyeampong), Kwadwo (Cudjoe) and Quao who were born Akan had led independent Maroon communities into the hills of Jamaica. We could fast forward to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and recognise the powerful ideas of J.E. Casely Hayford who was already pointing out in his writing, the need to set up educational systems which would be solidly African centred. Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist ideological stance, as we know, was responsible for a very wide range of policies and strategies which marked Ghana out as a champion for the Global African Community. These ranged from identifying the national iconography with concepts such as the Black Star, to promoting the Organisation of African Unity. The intentional inclusion of George Padmore and Dr. W.E.B. Dubois among his advisors is also evidence of his orientation. As I said, creative persons have reflected upon the concept of Pan-Africanism from many angles and I have mentioned a number of these. The establishment of the W.E.B. Dubois Memorial Centre for Pan African Culture under the guidance of Dr. Mohamed Ben Abdallah and the auspices of President Jerry John Rawlings was a process that I was privileged to be involved in in the mid-1980s but I dare say that PANAFEST and Emancipation Day represent recurring moments for symbolic enactments of commemoration and reconciliation. There is no doubt that the symbolic conferring of Ghanaian citizenship on groups of African descendants by President John Mahama and then by President Akufo Addo on a larger scale has engendered a growing demand for initiatives to manifest more concretely the opportunities for repatriation and re-integration. It would also appear that in the last two years or so, groups and communities are developing more and more bespoke ceremonies and shared experiences to bring about healing such as naming ceremonies, narratives of enslavement and reconciliation, conferences, joint communal activities etc. Perhaps the contemporary endeavours of the Pan-Africanist award-winning film maker Kwaw Ansah in establishing a museum in the historic town of Sekondi called Bisa Abrewa (ask the old lady) in which highlights of the global historical experiences of Africans are displayed is a massive individual effort. Perhaps I should end by drawing attention to the spectacularly striking work of the young artist Akoto-Bamfo who has created a collection of hundreds of busts of individuals in various states of powerful emotion reflecting anguish, bewilderment, determination etc. These have been set in Ada where a large number of persons were enslaved but have also been displayed to harrowing effect in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle. It is breath taking and speaks of the conscientisation of young Ghanaians

to the depth of the trauma of enslavement. (See [Ancestorprojectgh.com](http://Ancestorprojectgh.com)). Again a lengthy response! My apologies but you got me going there!

**CJAS:** Beyond the regular celebrations and periodic commemorations of the brutal history of slavery, are there any plans to establish a more organic relationship with the African Diaspora, for example celebrations of resilience and survival and other events that can help us turn the agonies of the past around to inspire innovation and creativity for transformation?

**ESA:** As I have tried to show, there has been an attempt to establish regular, formal platforms on which an evolving engagement with issues of trauma, resilience, survival, identity, progress, and wellbeing are being promoted through dialogue and artistic expression. These are expected to do exactly what you are saying which is 'to inspire innovation and creativity for transformation.' In addition to the formal platforms, there are literally hundreds of informal initiatives, some of them with a huge following such as some of the contemporary popular culture events which took place during the [Year of Return](#) ([Afrochella](#), [Afro Nation](#), [Detty Rave](#)). Others were community development initiatives as well as private consolidations of collaborative business. There is no doubt that there is going to be greater and greater demand on African governments to make it possible for people of African descent to have the choice and opportunity of living in Africa with the rights of citizens and not as strangers any longer. This for many would finally assuage any sense of rejection or abandonment. It is certainly a matter that must be actively engaged with to prove the genuineness of the call for a return.

**CJAS:** In your view, what is so important about linking Africans, and in this case Ghanaians, with our siblings in the African diaspora, and the Americas in particular?

**ESA:** In addition to all I have said above, I will paraphrase a useful concept often raised by Rabbi Kohain Halevi, the Executive Director of the PANAFEST Secretariat and a great thinker. He says that before individuals were enslaved they were members of families and communities. They had siblings and relatives and many of them played useful and prominent roles in society. They were not slaves. Secondly for the most part their communities and families have absolutely no idea what befell them and yet what happened to them is an integral part of the history of those families which must be relinked in order to make that history whole. Some of this history has been suppressed through collective amnesia although its repercussions keep bubbling up generation after generation. In other words, many families on the continent are missing a part of their history and a key to understanding how they and other Africans came to be where they are in the global scheme of things. In my view, the capacity to build on the knowledge of the resilience of the human spirit

and the power of the unified strength of African people around the world opens up possibilities which have not yet been explored for the transformation of their lives.

**CJAS:** One sometimes hears Ghanaians and other Africans complain that African Americans, and diaspora Africans more generally, treat those of us here in a patronising manner, as if they are the only ones who can determine how to live our blackness. Diaspora Africans, especially descendants of the enslaved, are sometimes heard to complain that continental Africans don't take matters of race and our history as enslaved people, and our contemporary socio-economic realities of exploitation seriously. What are some of the misunderstandings and miscommunications between Africans on both sides of the Atlantic that sometimes make our relationships fraught? And how can we bring about a deeper sense of shared siblinghood?

**ESA:** I am persuaded that moving away from the African continent even briefly often brings about a substantial change in perspective regarding one's position as an African. It is interesting how many people say that it was only when they left the continent that they realised that they were simply seen as black. The question of race assumes a weighty presence in their lives. While some persons resort to othering among discrete groupings e.g. Ghanaians keeping a wary distance from persons from the Caribbean, many on the other hand, experience a heightened consciousness of solidarity with other people of African descent and see their destinies as linked. It is therefore not surprising that those who descend from centuries of ancestors living away from the continent could lose their notions of ethnicity for example seeing people of the continent in an integrated fashion. Especially from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of the colonial grab of African resources, diasporan Pan-Africanists have emerged in the forefront of the quest to overthrow the hegemony of European and Western power over Africa's people and resources. To state the obvious, Africans in the diaspora do not all sing from the same hymn book with some being completely disengaged from their African origins. Interestingly enough, especially among those who are highly conscientised, there is a whole range of positions and opinions which might be symbolised by the infamous friction between W.E. B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey. Thrown into the mix are those who develop an essentialist position about Africa and seek to live according to an idealist African framework. For some of these categories of individuals and communities there is no tolerance for accommodation of European and Western peoples whose ancestors have oppressed Africans over centuries and who continue to benefit from the spoils of this hegemony.

On the other hand, Africans living on the continent who have experienced the ravages of colonialism have had an apparently different experience of relating to

Europe which has been far more insidious leading on the one hand to a syndrome referred to as the colonial mentality which is characterised by an uncritical acceptance of the narrative that Europeans are superior in all ways. On the other hand, there are those who are comfortable in their skin with the fact that African culture has evolved incorporating elements of European culture. They believe, on the whole, that the essence of their culture is intact although they understand that there has been a European conquest. Again, those who are conscientised against the hegemony of Europe have a wide range of opinions and convictions going from a more internationalist perspective to a stronger Afrocentric nationalist sense.

I agree with you that this situation is not helped by the lack of direct interaction among these groups of persons and their entrenched positions. The sentiment of mistrust necessarily takes a hold of the relationship. Thus, any encounter that is not accompanied by a prior openness to hearing and understanding each other with a view to creating a dialogue, is likely to perpetuate if not exacerbate the fragmentation of African communities around the world. For my part, however, I am convinced that when there have been opportunities for individuals and groups from both the continent and the diaspora to experience African retentions in the diaspora, or to attend a reasoned discussion on the fundamental similarities of the experience of oppression or the importance of the unification of the African continent, there is an emergent tendency towards greater understanding. It is important to find the triggers.

**CJAS:** What spaces or platforms exist for research collaborations between and among scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds working on issues pertaining to slavery, the slave trade, colonialism, the African diaspora, liberation, and pan-Africanism? Are there any areas we should focus on?

**ESA:** Just by way of setting a context, it is worth recalling that the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana was established with a vision of Africa which encompassed the entire experience of Africa across the globe and across the ages. This was the vision eloquently expressed by Dr Kwame Nkrumah when he opened the institute. Naturally, this panoramic vision should always be interpreted in its time to make it relevant. There are certainly certain fundamentals which need work to establish in the uphill battle against the Western dominance of the intellectual space. Developing methods and analytical frameworks which take their source from African ways of knowing is only one of these. There is also the critical task of validating the accumulated knowledge emanating from African experience and thought. There are so many erasures and gaps in the narrative and analytical discourse which need to be filled. This information is hidden in plain sight.

A systemic change is required to bring it into the mainstream. Luckily, there are many avenues and platforms which currently bring or could bring Global African scholars, scientists, and creatives together. The publications, research projects, and conferences of continental organisations like [CODESRIA](#) or the [African Studies Association of Africa](#) should reach out to intellectuals of African descent and take up themes pertaining to the African diaspora. There is also a critical of mass of institutions of higher learning in Africa, the Caribbean as well as Historically Black Universities in north and south America to say nothing of selected African/Africana Studies programmes in other institutions to boost the production and sharing of knowledge about matters African if there is a meeting of minds by an influential group of Global African academic leaders around this strategic goal.

I am also very excited about the public intellectual space which manifests particularly online. Surely there are real opportunities to focus the attention of the numerous users on fascinating topics and engaging discourses pertaining to Africa's past, present and future. The challenge of effectively utilising the channels of popular culture ought to engage those of us who aspire to contribute to an enhanced, knowledge-based discourse among Africans.

**CJAS:** I have seen young Africans today, especially those who travel to and from the US, express a greater sensitivity to a larger pan-African agenda. Do you think we are turning a curve for greater awareness and togetherness with millennials? If so, what makes you hopeful? And if not, what message would you send out on how to achieve a sense of appreciation of our connectedness, and working together for a common survival?

**ESA:** Eavesdropping on conversations among millennials, it would appear that there are strong traces of the perennial attitudes which can only be due to major gaps in the educational process, the pervasiveness of powerful stereotypes perpetuated through popular entertainment and media as well as the lack of exposure to the circumstances surrounding communities on the continent and in the diaspora. For example, putting tertiary students from Ghana and those from the historical diaspora together can still raise genuine lack of comprehension over each other's attitudes. Middle class Ghanaian students often feel that young people from the diaspora are privileged to be living in America and Europe – which they consider to be the land of opportunity. Their opinion is that most of these young people are lazy or complacent. They also sometimes feel that their counterparts from the diaspora are too quick to show animosity against all Europeans without discrimination. On the other hand, many students from the diaspora believe that their Ghanaian counterparts have been brainwashed and are insensitive to the depth of the trauma perpetuated by Europeans. This often manifests when mixed

groups undertake study tours of the dungeons of Cape Coast and Elmina slave forts, for example.

However, the change of attitude implied in your question is also very palpable. There are ardent discussions and creative dialogues going on among young people as well as collaborations between young people living on the continent and in the Diaspora in all manner business and artistic and social endeavours. This is no doubt aided by a greater mobility in and out of African worlds in contemporary times allowing for fresh inspiration and a wide and diverse audience/clientele.

**CJAS:** 2020 has turned into a very different year from all our expectations. There is a raging health pandemic and a storm of protests following the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, USA. What are the implications of this turn of events for all the plans generated to bring the African Diaspora closer to the Continent?

**ESA:** The Year of Return had certainly generated some debate as to whether it was a flash in the pan or a pivotal year for building systems aimed at easing the integration of diasporan Africans into the life of the continent. Expectations seemed to have been heightened leading the Government of Ghana into preparing strategies for the ‘Beyond the Return Programme.’

Little did we know that the world would be in a turmoil over the Covid-19 pandemic threatening the world as we know it and in this case the momentum of any activities built around travel, tourism and hospitality whether for work, spiritual reasons or for leisure. Perhaps, more importantly, the pandemic has forced us to re-examine in painful detail the lasting results of centuries of racially based oppression of Africans. African descended communities in Europe and the Americans are suffering disproportionately from the COVID-19 virus because of economically induced pre-existing conditions. Equally pertinently for the Global African Family, the harrowing murder of George Floyd, on Africa Day of all days, has triggered a wave of revulsion and a massive demand for restorative justice for African-descended communities which is resonating across the world.

There are so many lessons to be learnt from the Black Lives Matter Movement that has burst forth in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. One of these is that just because you ignore or suppress systemic injustice, it does not go away but rather festers and explodes. To this day city after city is being wracked by protests. Fundamental questions are being asked:

1) What is the nature of the history which has been passed down about the relationship between Europe, America and the peoples they enslaved and colonised?

Symbols of received versions of the colonial narrative are being discarded as young people topple statues seeming to say: “we are disgusted that the truth of our history has been suppressed leaving us with monuments to the perpetrators of racially based injustice.”

Critical demands are being made for total transformations of systems of policing and governance.

One does not know where these rolling storm clouds of anti-racist protests will end but clearly it is not only in Europe and America that these and other questions should be asked. I am convinced that it is also time for serious introspection on this continent and in Ghana in particular about the uncomfortable truths relating to the ways in which we are not yet free from the unhealthy aspects of our relationship with Europe and America.

2) What version of our history are we teaching our young people?

3) Are our traditional duty bearers willing to tell the true stories of enslavement with a view to cleansing our societies of its shackles?

4) Are our religious and corporate leaders willing to look at the institutions we adhere to from the West which have been very much a part of establishing the unequal global system we are involved in now?

It is true that the state of Ghana has held a memorial to George Floyd in collaboration with leaders of the repatriated African descendants and was the only African country whose message was captured as part of the official funeral of George Floyd. Additionally, the theme for the 1<sup>st</sup> August 2020 celebration of Emancipation Day is “Leveraging Our Resistance: Black Lives Matter”. However monitoring comments in the media including social media, many Ghanaians acknowledge that it was a sad occurrence but feel that the government should focus on resolving local problems of injustice. In addition, at the level of policy it is obvious that the security forces in Ghana have not been sensitised to the Black Lives Matter Movement sweeping across many parts of the world and have shown hostility to a young people’s vigil which was organised by the Economic Fighters League in May [leading to a violent dispersal of participants](#) and the arrest of the leader of the league, Ernesto Yeboah.

I am convinced that the middle class, who are plausibly in touch with significant activism around the world regarding the interrogation of the racial underpinnings of the Euro-American political and economic systems and its long term effects on Africa and Afro-descended communities living in the diaspora, are staying in the relatively safe space of social media. There are very few interventions seeking

to join the sweeping Black Lives Matter movement and even more importantly, demonstrate its relevance to life here on the continent. One is tempted to entertain the cynical thought that Continental Africans will once again be absent from the table as a new narrative is being woven about the continent. One can only hope that there will be a coalition of the forces which have been organising in different ways to powerfully stimulate salutary changes in the systems and attitudes directly generated by centuries of Euro–American hegemony.

**CJAS:** is there anything else you would like to share?

**ESA:** I must reiterate my gratitude for the opportunity to move from the rather frenetic mode of conceptualising and delivering programmes under pressure, to documenting some of the processes and challenges involved in rolling them out. More importantly has been the opportunity to contextualise all of it in historical, contemporary, and future frames. I hope that these reflections will resonate with and provoke further thinking about the shared Global African past and present realities as well as collaborations in the shaping African futures.

**CJAS:** Thank you for your time.