

Alfred Kanga

Interview date: December 11, 2000

Location of interview: Ethnographer's office at the Balch Institute

Country of origin: Sierra Leone

Ethnic group/language group: Mende

Religion: Methodist

Profession: Prison chaplain

Level of education: Doctoral studies not completed

Location of residence in Philadelphia: Northeast Philadelphia

Reverend Kanga came to the United States when he was accepted at the Delaware, Ohio Methodist seminary to do a Masters in Theology in 1975. He sent for his wife after 6 months. She came in 1976, and finally got her green card in 1985.

When he finished in 1979, and his wife had finished her bachelors, they went back to Sierra Leone. They had two children by that time. Later the same year, he returned to serve in a church in West Virginia. He later moved to Pittsburgh to begin doctoral studies and work in a hospital. When the hospital where he worked closed in 1984, he transferred to Philadelphia.

Reverend Kanga is involved in the Sierra Leone community, and has been for quite a while. He helped to form the Tegloma Association, but is no longer a member. He left the Tegloma Association because he no longer felt it should be ethnic-based. Reverend Kanga is a member of the United Sierra Leonians for Peace and Development and thinks it is a way to put aside tribal fears and prejudices about each other.

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Alfred Kanga (AK)

[START SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Can you give me your name?

AK: Alfred () Kanga.

LS: And you are from?

AK: Sierra Leone, West Africa.

LS: What's your ethnic group?

AK: I am a Mende.

LS: I don't know the names well enough to be able to pinpoint them. Like people who live there. And your native language is?

AK: Mende.

LS: Where did you grow up in Sierra Leone?

AK: Different places. I grew up in the East, which is the diamond mining area. In fact, my tribe borders with the Kona tribe. So, in fact, I speak a little bit of Kona and Temne because the part of Mendeland that I come from wedges between both tribes. And so it gives me that versatility to be able to converse in three of the ethnic languages. But I grew up in Kona, in a town called Chayama(?). There is a big United Methodist school there, boarding school. And I was an orphan. My mother died when I was three years old. And I grew up in the mission house, in Kona, with the missionaries so that's how I --- my father moved me up there, away from my tribe, from my people, to go to school in that area.

LS: So from what age were you at the Methodist?

AK: First of all, I had gone to school at the age of five. My mom was alive then and, ummm, and, ummm, it was in a Mendeland where my father was born in a town called Taama(?). That was in 1949. And shortly after I had been in Taama, there was a cholera outbreak in my village, back in Mendema, and my mother died in that. So I was taken to my uncle who worked for the public works in Freetown. And I lived in Freetown with him for I don't know how many years. But I vaguely remember in 1955 they brought me back home to the village and unfortunately my uncle did not send me to school, which my dad had wanted him to do.

LS: So when you were in Freetown you didn't go to school?

AK: So I didn't go to school. I was just a house-boy and when my father learnt about that, in 1955, they went and took me away from my uncle.

LS: So you worked as a house-boy in someone else's house? Or for your ---

AK: Well, my uncle. My father's younger brother.

LS: But you worked in his house?

AK: Yeah. I mean, I didn't work. I lived there and ---

LS: And you helped in the house.

AK: Yeah. Kept the house, clean the yard and things like that. Little things little boys did.

LS: What was it like to leave Freetown and go back to a rural area? Do you remember?

AK: [laughs] I was happy to go back home, really. Freetown was no attraction for me. Was too big, I'm, you know, coming from a little village. So I never really enjoyed myself in Freetown except for the latter years when I grew up, I really got to know Freetown. And I began to put in the missing links. So, in 1957, I went to Kona. After I had been in the village school for two years, my father sent me there. Then I was a real big boy, about fourteen years old. I went to Kona.

LS: The Methodist missionaries were from where?

AK: My adopted mother missionary was from the Americas. In fact, she lives in Joplin. Her name is Vivian Olson and she raised me.

LS: These were American Methodist missionaries?

AK: Yes. Well, they were former EUBs.

LS: What's EUB?

AK: Evangelical United Brethren.

LS: It's interesting because I have talked to another Sierra Leonean pastor who is with the United Brethren. Joseph Abu?

AK: Yeah, Abu?

LS: Yes.

AK: UBC, yes.

LS: And that was the same thing, that's United Brethren and now they call it United African Church?

AK: Yes. What happened, the EUB Missionaries went to Africa and in 1948, there was a split. This was a split here in America about those people who were Freemasons. The question was that they should accept them in the EUB church. And the conference was split. One group of the conference, which I grew up in was EUB, Evangelical Wing. They said that they didn't make any difference because of their

mission work. If we say those who belong to secret societies, like the Buntu(?) which qualifies like the Freemasons or ---

LS: Right. One of the secret societies ---

AK: That's right. They would be classified ---

LS: Oh, interesting.

AS: --- as a secret society, because this is our culture. And they cannot in their conscience vote along with the race to --- ahh, what may I say? --- to ban them from Christianity or excommunicate them or you know, with that work was to evangelize and hopefully convert this so-called healing to Christianity. So if we, at that time, say we cannot accept the people belonging to secret societies, then we are really limiting our scope of the Gospel.

LS: And most children do go in, both boys and girls, to secret societies?

AK: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

LS: So that is cutting a lot of potential members ---

AK: Sure, potential Christians. If that was the case, I wouldn't have been a Christian because I had been initiated as a child in these societies because of my tribe. So, the evangelical, we voted no. And thus the UB Church had now two wings in Sierra Leone: the United Brethren Church in Africa and EUB, Evangelical United Brethren. So the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1973 merged with the Methodist in America and we became United Methodist Church.

LS: Oh, is that right?

AK: That's right.

LS: So the Evangelicals accepted secret societies?

AK: That's right.

LS: And the regular United Brethren did not?

AK: That's right. So Abu is from the other wing. [both laugh]

LS: But he's Mende also?

AK: Oh, yes, he is. But I'm talking about something, Abu wasn't born by then. I was only barely a few years old when this split happened in the church. I was about four years old. Miss Olson told me the stories and I read it when I applied for the ministry and I studied to be a minister. So I studied about history, about our history.

[tape pause]

LS: I just remember Joseph Abu talking about how he had been brought up by a woman from Michigan and you say you were brought up by a woman from Missouri. The Midwest, they seem to have a big influence in Sierra Leone.

AK: Well, she really from Nebraska. Umm, where is it --- the town --- in Nebraska --- Imperial. Imperial, Nebraska, she was born in Imperial. And she went to the country as a missionary and the story is that the day she arrived there was a village clinic(?) in Tama(?), my father's hometown, and my mother had me there. And she was one of the people, the missionaries, in the mission house. And she became a friend with my mother and for a long time when my father moved from Tama(?) I went to the east, his mother's home. They lost contact with Miss Olson. It was many, many years back when we had UB people were back again and started the school in our village and then she was asking, "Where is that lady?" And they told her she died. They told her the story. And then I was in Kona. And when I passed the selective entrance --- that is the school when you finish elementary school, going to secondary school --- so she took over my --- because high school education over there was so expensive.

LS: So even though you'd missed those early years of schooling you were able to catch up?

AK: Well, I didn't catch up with my age group, but because of my age I was able to skip some classes, some grades, because I was more mature than the rest of the children that were in class with me. And I was able to jump ahead of one more every time we had an exam or we were in class, we had a quiz, I would get the highest mark. And so, I was doing more work at home. The advantage was I was living again in the boarding home with the missionaries. And there was electrical light and I had time to study and do work ---

LS: And fewer distractions?

AK: And fewer distractions. So I was able to be ahead of everybody else. And I had also home help because some of these missionaries were teachers, also.

LS: So this was not their school? This was ---

AK: This was their school. But the boarding home was --- like we were full timers. They were selected group of boys and girls who were living in the mission house, going to school. Then the rest of the children were day school.

LS: Day school, I see. I suppose boarding school is kind of a common experience for a lot of African children. But that didn't seem strange to be separated from your family and living with people from a different country?

AK: Nooo. Like I said, by then I had overcome all this --- missing my dad, and my ma has died. So it wasn't much missing there, because I had been that I have lived with my uncle for so many years in Freetown, away from my grandmamma and mother, I mean, my father. It wasn't a problem for me to be in Kona in boarding school. In fact, it was more healthier for me because I had a lot of other children living there and we would go and do all childish things, play around, play games, entertain ourselves, and challenge each other to certain things. So it was exciting.

LS: Did they have more of an American system or did you do O Levels like the British system?

AK: Yes, we did O Levels. We did, what I told you, the Common Entrance. That's the exam that you took to matriculate for high school. And after, then in three years of high school you took what is called Junior Kantab(?). A Junior Kantab(?) is like Junior Cambridge in those days. You took the Junior Cambridge to see whether you go to senior high. It's an external exam, also it is an eternal exam, and they give certificates for that. And after I passed my Junior Kantab(?), I went to the senior high and then at the end of the two years I had the O Level.

LS: And how old were you at that point, when you finish senior high school? [AK laughs]

AK: Oh boy, oh boy.

LS: Nineteen or twenty years or something like that?

AK: That's right. I was, uhhh, what --- 1966, so I must have been, what? If I was born '44, so in 1966 I was twenty-two years old when I finished high school.

LS: And then what?

AK: I went to the mission school --- Bible school --- college.

LS: In Sierra Leone?

AK: In Sierra Leone. In Bo. From '66 to '68, '69.

LS: Is it Bo, is that right?

AK: Yes, Bo.

LS: I've heard about that.

AK: That is the second largest city in the country.

LS: In fact that might be where Joseph Abu went to?

AK: Yes. And the Bible Institute is there.

LS: Who runs that then? That's United Brethren?

AK: United Brethren, yes. My adopted ma was a principal in fact [laughs]. So that was again another family experience, because I matriculated and I passed in three years. After two years, I finished the theoretical preparation for --- to be, what you call it, an evangelist. So I became an evangelist in Bo town. I was a primary school teacher as well as an evangelist, preaching on Sundays, evangelizing with the neighborhoods, trying to get Christian converts.

LS: The Mende are --- there are Muslim Mende, right?

AK: Mendes are predominantly Muslim.

LS: That's what I thought, okay.

AK: The Mende tribe is also closely linked with the Mandingo tribe ---

LS: And they are almost Muslim ---

AK: So, yeah, so this is why --- in fact, they are almost the same ethnic group.

LS: Yeah.

AK: And the Mendes are part of Lidinga(?), they are the same tribe.

LS: The languages are mutually intelligible ---

AK: Just a little (). But the Mende are derived from Mandingo.

LS: Were you trying to convert Muslims?

AK: [laughs] Well ---

LS: Or people who () traditional religions?

AK: Yes, yes, I did everything. We were trained to. My father, as a chief, was also a Muslim. My brothers were Muslims. In fact, that's why when I went to Christian school it was difficult for my brothers. They said he is going to be a different person. He is going to be a Christian, and when my dad died in 1968, he was buried as a Muslim. And, umm, I been to the funeral. I knew exactly what was transpiring because I have seen many of the Muslim ceremonies. I participated in them as a child so I wasn't a stranger to it. I knew what --- what --- and even now when I return, I go to visit to the gravesite, it's a shrine, and I take my shoes off. Even when he was alive, before I enter his room, I have to take my shoes off. So it's the same thing. So, I may say I'm a man who have gone through so many experiences, religiously.

LS: Well that's probably a good preparation for what you do?

AK: I think it did prepare me.

LS: I lived in Senegal for a long time and almost all the conversion was from Christianity toward Islam and not Islam towards Christianity ---

AK: No, no, no. Most Islamic --- most people with my background as children grew up in Islamic homes. They go into schools and soon they begin to observe certain inconsistencies, what the Koran teaches and how the people live. And they become curious, it doesn't satisfy their religious quest. Just like it happens here in America. Children born in traditional Christian homes, grow up teenagers or young adults, begin to see the nefarious practices by Christians themselves. For example, you can go to church on Sunday and hug a black man and say "God loves you" and then the next thing you know, they're are putting on the white hood and scaring everybody to death. And they going to do all kinds of little things that they do which is not Christian. And so when I was in seminary in Ohio, this is kind of thing that we

discussed a lot in class, that children who conducted youth groups, and things like that, children were often to say, “You are raising us to be Christians but then you older Christians practice something as different. And when we see this, we ask you the questions you don’t ask --- give it --- what is it --- you not gonna --- you don’t understand.” Either you --- what Christians is especially do is rationalize their actions. So the same thing happens in Islam. I read the Koran, which says that a man is allowed to marry as many wives as he can, not more than four, provided that he is capable of loving them all and providing them equally.

LS: [laughs] And how often have you see that happen?

AK: But the Koran didn’t stop there. He said that it is impossible for a man to love two things equally. And so the conclusion, therefore, anybody can draw from, where the Koran just stops short: is telling people “marry one woman that you love.” But the Koran goes all the way and say you can marry as many as you can, up to four, and four is a limit, provided you are able to love them equally and provide to them equally, no partiality. Then the Koran, the last verse, says but it is so impossible for a man to love two things equally. So you who is a Muslim teacher should know that the conclusion is: marry one wife. And this bothered me because my father had ten wives.

LS: And so the ten was more of the traditional Mende as a chief?

AK: That’s right. As many as he can. He () the Koran, he really didn’t even go to the four. He said “as many as you can” and it bothered me when I came back from school, holidays, and asked, “Daddy, what about this verse in the Koran? What is it saying of Sura(?) Massee(?)? What is it saying about women?” [changes tone] You don’t understand. We live in Africa, my grandfather had this, my father had this, and he explained all the cultural reasons for marrying many wives. And I told him, okay, but you didn’t obey the Koran. And he will say, “I didn’t send you to school to come and be a lawyer here.” [both laugh]

LS: He didn’t appreciate it ---

AK: No! [laughs] And one time, my brother and I, Daddy saw this young girl. We were older than this girl! And she spoke seven different dialects. She’s been around. And he was in the seventies and he said he wants to pay the bride price for this young girl and my brother and I were very furious. We went to

him. We were the only two who could tell him the truth. So we called him in the back, in the bathroom in the backyard. “Now what are you up to? You want to drop dead? You want to have a heart attack, you old man? What is wrong with you?” And he said, “Look, if you don’t lay off, I’m going to put a curse on you.” [laughing]

LS: So he married her?

AK: He married! [laughing] As soon as he said, “I’m gonna put a curse on you two” we backed off. And then six months later, the girl stole about two hundred pounds sterling from his safe and disappeared and we never saw her. And my brother and I saw him --- “Ah-ha! What a curse you put on us. It looks like you cursed yourself!” He said, [AK imitates his father in a furious tone] “Watch your mouth. I can still whup you all.” We just laughed ().

LS: Was that his last wife?

AK: Yeah. [both laugh]

LS: How long were you an evangelist in Sierra Leone?

AK: I was evangelist from 1968 to ‘69 and I went to seminary in England, college, in Bristol University.

LS: You went to a seminary in Bristol?

AK: Mmm-hmm.

LS: How did you know about this place?

AK: Bristol? Well, being British colony, Africa being a British colony, we actually knew a lot about British universities and colleges.

LS: Was it a Methodist seminary?

AK: Yes. And I went there for three years, returning in 1972 in Sierra Leone. And continued to work as evangelist and was ordained as minister in 1974.

LS: Were you still in the North?

AK: Yeah, I worked in the North. I worked in Makeni. I worked in Makeni, the Sena(?) capital, the capital of the Northern Province.

LS: Then what happens?

AK: I was a teacher in high school and a minister in a church. I organized some churches there, and the schools, (), and in 1974, '75, a missionary who was in Kono, where I was first as a child, retired. And they needed an ordained minister in the Kono to be a superintendent, so they moved me out there and I was acting as the acting superintendent of the mission. The same position my ma had before, my adopted mother has had. So I lived in the mission house. [laughs]

LS: Oh, how strange ---

AK: Yes, it was. The house I grew up with as a little boy, now I was a master in that house. She came and visited me severally. In fact, that's where I got married.

LS: So you were married at this time?

AK: Yes. And I got married in Sierra Leone. But before I left England in '72, a visiting professor called Donald Webb, in the college I was, interested me in America. He had also attended the same college I was in England. He was a Britisher and had come to America and become a naturalized citizen. And he was working in the seminary as the admissions professor, what we call a Registrar in England. He was the Registrar for the seminary in Ohio, Delaware, Methodist Theological School. And he said, well, being that you're the kind of Methodist come from America, you need to go to the United States and have an experience in the UB history, places like Dayton, Ohio, Asbury in Kentucky, Otobank(?) College in westerly Ohio, Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. And he named a whole host of institutions, Lebanon College and other places. And he said, you'll be able to appreciate UB, United Methodist a whole lot better, and understand their history if you went there and studied in this places. So I applied, and in 1975 I was accepted at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio to do Masters in Theology.

LS: To do your what?

AK: To pursue a Masters in Theology.

LS: A Masters in Theology.

AK: Degree.

LS: So this is where in where --- Dayton?

AK: Delaware, Ohio. Delaware. Just about fifteen or twenty miles north of Columbus on Route 23.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

LS: So what year is this?

AK: September, '75.

LS: And then how long a program is that?

AK: It's a three-year program. In fact, I did a two degrees simultaneously. I was doing Masters in theology as well as Masters in education.

LS: Did you come alone? Did you come with your wife?

AK: Yes, I came, six months later I sent for my wife. I came as a graduate student and the Methodist Society said they are gonna have a student pastorate, a student assignment which will be able to help me. The stipend would help me pay my tuition, as well as take care of my family. The stipend was about ten thousand dollars a year to eleven thousand dollars a year. And I had some scholarships and things like that, so --- I've some money, there was some money there. So I thought that it was necessary that my family join me.

LS: So you had children also?

AK: Here?

LS: Uh-huh. Oh, you didn't have any children?

AK: I did have --- well, before I got married I had been messing around. [laughs]

LS: I've heard that story before. So you had some children, but you didn't have children with this wife?

AK: That's right. So I had two boys, extramarital, before I was married. That was my old days when I was a schoolteacher and an evangelist. That time --- I had had two children.

LS: Are they still in Sierra Leone?

AK: One is in Sierra Leone, one is here.

LS: So your wife came over and she couldn't work, she could just ---

AK: No, she couldn't work. Because she came on a student --- extended student visa. And she had to wait until I become a green card holder, permitted to work. Then we applied with her to be green card person. And when she got her green card is when she started working.

LS: And how long did that take?

AK: A l-o-o-o-n-g time. She came in 1976, she didn't work until we came to Philadelphia. In 1985, she started working. That's nearly about nine years.

LS: So when you finished your program, you didn't want to go back to Sierra Leone?

AK: Nooo ---

LS: How did that work?

AK: When I finished my program, I had wanted to go to Sierra Leone. In fact, I did go to Sierra Leone in 1979. My wife was still doing her Bachelors studies. I was going to go early if I had a job in Sierra Leone waiting for me, I would have gone and started like I did here. Go back, start to prepare and then she would --- go back, because we now have --- by then had two children born here, and, and, and we were more concerned about them, how that we can, ahh, they can --- we can help them acclimatize over there.

LS: They'd never been there?

AK: They'd never been there. So it required one of us to go, to return, and prepare a home that would be the kind that they'd be used. So I went in 1979. Unfortunately, it was the same year that there was a change-over. We was changing a bishop. There was a bishop election going on in my country, in our church. My best friend, the man who has been my mentor all my life was running for the position of bishop. And another friend of mine, who was a teacher, also approached me and he said he was a candidate. And either of them wanted my vote, so I - I - I said let me play fairly. Let me go, first of all, let me check these people out and see really what are their agenda. And I asked him, the man that has been my teacher, I asked him his platform, what are the things he want to bring to the Sierra Leone church. His agenda was --- by then, the church in Sierra Leone has gained autonomy from America. We are now an independent church, the United Methodist Church. And his agenda was --- well, the ministers are not well paid. So the only way we can have them paid to the American standard, like some of you who go to America and be trained, wanted to have that kind of training. So, I think either he was trying to persuade me to support him, so we gonna take this church back and rescind our autonomy and join the American church and become a connection church. That way, we can have support from America.

LS: So you'd be in that hierarchy?

AK: Yeah. So I went to the other man and asked him, "What is your agenda for the church?" And what he told me was what I wanted to hear. I wanted this church to remain African, because Christ is Christ of all, God is God of all. We can no longer continue to attach ourselves to America and every time something happen, we go back begging. We want to maintain our autonomy. At the same time, we want to develop programs in here, in this country, that would support this church to be able to stand on its own. And if this means we're going to be poor for a while, we're going to struggle and sacrifice, well, in the end, this church is going to be indigenous Christianity and I thought that was the message I wanted to hear.

LS: And you can be in secret societies and everything?

AK: That's right! Well, no ---not only being in secret society, but that the founding fathers of our wing of the Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, this was what they were saying to us. When in 1948, when they broke away from the UB that we want the Africans to remain uniquely African and bring the unique experience to Christianity. We don't want to destroy them, we don't want to destroy their culture. () this was good. And I said, you have my vote.

LS: Did he win?

AK: He didn't win. [laughs]

LS: The other man won?

AK: The other man won. And so, the first thing was, he told me, "Well, you made a bad choice, boy. Now what do you have to say for yourself?"

LS: 'Cause your vote was public?

AK: Oh, yeah. I was not a quiet person. I have learned a very hard way. [both laugh] My wife and I were on the floor. Yelling, canvassing, riding at night, talking to people without experience in America. And we talking about, say, "This man is stupid, because he doesn't know America is all about freedom and individual experience with God. The Americans do not want to destroy our culture, they didn't want to destroy us and make us pseudo-Americans. They want us to grow up as Africans, but Christians. And

we kept hammering that message. The election was very close, but they won. So, I was a persona non grata.

LS: So you just had to leave Sierra Leone?

AK: I did have to leave Sierra Leone. My plans to go back and settle down were thwarted by that. So I came back to the United States.

LS: And then you were able to get a church or a ---

AK: No, I was then serving a church in West Virginia and he [Sierra Leonean bishop] came for a Bishop's conference. And before he returned, he had made it known what I did in Africa when I went home. And then this issue arise from my bishop () in West Virginia said, "Well, sir, that position that we are holding in that church is a student pastorate. At the moment, we don't have a position for full time ordained minister, blah blah blah." And I said, "Okay, well, I wouldn't mind to give up the position if there was a -- a student, want to put a student there." I understand I'm not a citizen. So that year I applied for my citizenship. And I didn't just stop there. I applied to the State of Pennsylvania to work as a mental health counselor. I went back to school to do some psychology, and with my psychology background, I applied that to work with the retarded people and that's how I worked for the state as a mental health therapist.

LS: And why Pennsylvania?

AK: Because I didn't want to stay in West Virginia. In Pennsylvania, I had started doing my PhD studies in the Pittsburgh University by then. So I moved to Pittsburgh and that gave me the opportunity to continue my studies.

LS: Because Pittsburgh is pretty close to West Virginia.

AK: Yeah, so it was one step.

LS: And so --- wow, you've done a lot of training.

AK: Umm-hmm.

AK: So you worked in Pittsburgh? You were in Pittsburgh?

AK: Yeah, I went to Pittsburgh. School of Education.

LS: And then your wife was there, and your children ---

AK: My children --- yeah, we had one more child in 1980 so there was about, uhh, now instead of one child we have two. And in 1986, we had another one. But because of my work in the state and the economy strain, I had to stop my PhD pursuit and just concentrate on raising a family and working. So when the mental hospital closed in Pittsburgh, they transferred me to Philadelphia in 1984.

LS: And where are you --- where did you come in Philadelphia?

AK: Mmmh?

LS: Did you come to a hospital in Philadelphia?

AK: Yes.

LS: Which hospital?

AK: They used to call it Byberry. Philadelphia State Hospital. It was a hospital for mental health.

LS: Is that where you are now?

AK: No, it's closed.

LS: Now you're in the prisons, right?

AK: Now I work now in the prisons.

LS: So the state hospital closed?

AK: Yeah.

LS: Well, they have another state hospital. Or do they just ---

AK: They have another state hospital in Norristown and Allentown. My wife works in Norristown.

LS: In the state hospital?

AK: Yes.

LS: Or so she does the same ---

AK: She also had a psychology degree and so she's working in Norristown as an Alcohol and Drug Therapist, Addiction Therapist.

LS: I know some people in Norristown and they say that a lot of people who get out of the state hospital end up staying right in Norristown.

AK: Umm-hmm.

LS: So that's changed certain areas in Norristown. So also, at some point, weren't a lot of people de-institutionalized, 'cause the state hospital system got so ---

AK: Yes, yes. But what happened in the '80s is that they closed the state mental hospital ---Byberry --- let me just talk about Byberry, that's (). When we closed Byberry, a whole lot of our clients who had been in the institution, who were, who couldn't survive on the streets, on their own, instead of putting them in a shelter --- the idea was to put them in shelter homes where they can be, go to work, come back home ---

LS: Be supervised ---

AK: Be supervised. Instead we just --- some of the people who contracted with the state, I don't know what happened, but when I went to the state prison, a whole lot of my old clients who were in mental health were in that jail.

LS: Oh, I see. So instead of being put in a halfway house they just () ---

AK: Yeah, ()

LS: --- in a criminal facility.

AK: Yeah, yeah. Because, I mean, they have --- they, what they were telling me, "We can't survive, we can't work. We have a history of mental health. Nobody's willing to () on medication. And those who are not on medication, what se do is, go back and steal, petty stealing, and that's landed us ().

LS: That must have been very upsetting, to see that.

AK: Yeah. Yeah. This happens, you know. In fact, the statistics, say nationwide most of the prisoners in jail are not mostly criminals. Most of them are, a whole number of them are --- () I've forgotten the percentage --- of them are mental, and that's very sad. I mean these people need healing rather than being incarcerated.

LS: And are they getting any kind of counseling?

AK: They do get counseling, but not in a kind of atmosphere as compared to the hospital where they were () hospitals that were doing research in the mental health field, and they were equipped in those days --- uh, there were many abuses, I may say, with those because people who were working, some of us who

were working in that field, were not professionally trained. People were just picked up to be aides without understanding the only way of treating mental health was without by punishment or by restraining them or by doing a whole lot of --- mental health field was providing a service, a service that the state penitentiary is not equipped to give. There are two () here. Mental health institutions were working for the mental health of the client. The state penitentiary, their priority is security, security, security. So it's more like, put them in the warehouse and keep them, as long as they don't get out of here, they won't be a trouble to the (). Now, it works. How is it? They are out of the streets, they are not hurting anybody, they are in the jail. But what about ()? These are questions which need to be ---

LS: Yeah, well, the prison system is --- So, how long have you worked in the prison system, then?

AK: I started working in Graterford. I started with juvenile detention in 1989. And I took some time off, getting back into mental health therapy. About seven years, then I returned to the prison system.

LS: In what prison are you in now?

AK: Graterford.

LS: Graterford? I don't know that.

AK: It's basically Collegeville.

LS: It's in where?

AK: Collegeville.

LS: Oh, okay.

AK: It's back of Norristown. You live in Norristown?

LS: No, I live in Haverford right now. And what's your position there?

AK: I'm a chaplain.

LS: You're a chaplain. You don't do mental health, you're pastor now. And what's that like? Are there other chaplains from all kinds of different denominations?

AK: Yes, there are Catholic chaplains, Jewish, Islamic, and Lutheran, and the Protestant chaplain.

LS: And is that something that when people come to you, upon request, you do regular services? What is the ---

AK: I hold Sunday services. I also visit the wards. Talk to inmates and sometimes, [sighs] most of these inmates are concerned about the hell, like those who are on life sentences or who have done capital punishments or something like heinous crimes. And while there they find time to reflect on their action, and you see a whole lot of religious people in the prison. I may say you would find more religious people in the jail than on the streets. Now ---

LS: Because they come back to it?

AK: Now, that's the question. You got to be careful as a religious person not to discourage somebody's faith wherever they coming from. There are, of course, various reasons why people come to the church. One is, maybe it may look nice on their parole board and they say this man is reformed, he is a religious man, and come back. That may be their motivation. And maybe motivation to also come to the church and get some privileges and find a place. Because when you are locked in your cell, you really want to get out and go and mingle with some ---with people. And so there is that need, also. But there are those who really feel genuinely concerned about their hereafter. I have done this X, Y, Z, I've done this crime, I've done this (), and I want to have forgiveness for my life. Now these are --- so --- you the minister, you're confronted with all these people coming for various reasons. All what you need to do is give the Gospel as best as you can. Preach the word of God and talk to them. Counsel with them, in their various situations, not questioning their motives. But also telling them the truth of the Gospel, what the Gospel requires, and let them be aware.

LS: How do people respond to you as an African pastor, not an American? [AK laughs] Are they surprised or they ---

AK: Well, it's been a major, uh, uh, uh, thing. Even when I was in church in West Virginia, when I was in the street there having a church, the question has always been: what has this African got to teach us about Christianity? And for most of my Christian life in America, it's about twenty five years now, I have daily been confronted with those issues. Ummm ---

LS: Because they think you're less qualified to teach us about Christianity?

AK: No, the question is --- First of all, Christianity that we have in Africa came from the West and, obviously, it has never been observed in the West that Christianity was in Africa before it came here.

LS: You mean with Saint Augustine and ---

AK: Of course, Ignatius, Augustine, and all the other early theologians, prominent theologian in the church history, from Clement of Alexander, and all those people were Africans. And they forget that there was Christianity in Ethiopia, in Morocco, in Libya, in Tunisia. Even in Egypt! And Saudi Arabia! Coptic Christianity. And yet, when you say when your name is Masambula, you are an African, you are Christian, the question: what does he know about Christianity? And sometimes they overlook that or they don't know it.

LS: Is it ever inspiring? I imagine that you deal with a lot of Christians who are African Americans?

AK: Yes, I have that. But you'll be surprised to find out that most of my problem are coming from my own, from my own, the African Americans, my own black people.

LS: They are the ones who question you the most?

AK: Sure.

LS: More than white Americans?

AK: Sure. The reason is, one is, curiosity. "What do you know that we don't know?" That's one thing. "How come you are an African?" And this question comes mostly from the Muslim brothers in the jail.

LS: I was going to ask you about them, too. So you have contact with the Muslims ---

AK: Oh, yeah. They come to the chapel.

LS: So they can --- anybody, even it's not your religion, you can talk to them?

AK: I can talk to them, I can talk to them. There is a fellow African, who is a Nigerian, who is a chaplain for the Muslims, and most of the time they can't tell the difference between him and I. They think that it's me who is a Muslim chaplain.

LS: [laughing] I see.

AK: Okay. [laughing] I have to tell them, "Look, I'm a Christian." And then we go into conversation, "Now tell me, how come you are a Christian?"

LS: Well, what's the Methodist population in the US? The indigenous American Methodist population?

Are many of them black? Or is it most of them white?

AK: Yes. You have the most population of Methodist American and black Americans is very few,

LS: It's few. Okay.

AK: Compared to the Baptist. The Baptist have a bigger following of African Americans. Then the Methodist, the Church of Christ people and the other charismatic churches carried a lot of African American population.

LS: How would do you define a charismatic church? I keep running into lots of African churches here and they're "apostolic" and "evangelical" and all those, and I don't have a very good background on that. When you say "charismatic", what does that mean exactly?

AK: Charismatic church is --- the word "charisma" is from the Greek word, meaning "spiritual gifts". So it's a word "a spiritual gift." And the emphasis is of the gift of the Holy Spirit. And most of the present churches, the born-again Christianity, now becomes like a little inner group of Christians who believe that you are not a Christian until you been born again and you have "an indwelling(?) of the Holy Spirit," quote-unquote. And so, you are not traditional, you go to the church, you do a whole lot of shouting, emotion, all that, and sometimes speaking in tongues. And sometimes people even claim that they have performed miracles in these services. And they take the Bible completely ---

LS: Literally.

AK: --- literally, in that there is no other interpretation. If you have a different kind of understanding --- even if it is a well-academic postulation that you come from --- it's regarded pagan. () faith. You've got to believe entirely on the Bible. If the Bible said that God killed the children of Egypt in the Red Sea to save the Jews, you have to say, yes God did it because they were heathens. And, and you find, they cannot rationalize that. It wasn't God that did it. It was a man that had faith in God because he overcame his enemies in a very miraculous way that he couldn't () the force of nature was against his opponents and they won the battle because of that. Because I have faith in God, I'm going to turn around and say God did it for me, because there is no way that I could have won this battle against Egypt. So it was God

that did it. That's common with people with faith in God. But then to turn around and say, well it was really God who was engineering after all, it's another step. Then you would say, now God had created some other people and particularly hate them and wished that everything can happen to them. How can you justify Samson going to the Philistines and mutilating them? Just that they had to be different.

That's ---

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

AK: --- come in with their own brand of Christianity. And we just have to keep the faith and say, "Well, have your way."

LS: If you had stayed in Sierra Leone --- let's say you had gone and that the man of your choice was elected as the bishop --- what do you think you could have done?

AK: I was going to be involved. I wanted to be involved in the training of the indigenous African ministers.

LS: So you would have helped develop this autonomous Sierra Leonean African Church?

AK: Yes. In the sense that if you want to train the ministers --- for example, there are so many Christian traditions that can be understood or can be faithfully practiced in Africa and Africans can find their roots in it without being quote-unquote a "Western" kind of --- like, let's take the idea of communion. The African people have been used to pouring libation to the ancestors. And that is sharing a sacred meal or drink with God and the saints and all that have come before you. That's a link, with the departed and the living, the dead and the living. And that's also the vine and the mountain, that this meal is one that brings atonement, it bridges the gap between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane, and make them one in the presence of God. And God participates in that. The African have worshipped God that way. The pouring of libation, the sharing of meal, the communal meal together. Now to Christianize, I mean to make that meal in memory of Jesus necessarily do not have to be a bread and wine. They could be a rice dough, like they do in Senegal in the Moslem practice, and maybe palm wine and the rice dough. That which is representative of that culture. And it can be as meaningful as grape and bread.

LS: Or more meaningful.

AK: Or more meaningful, yeah.

LS: Now, I understand, so there's no --- I'm sure some people would see contradiction in those and you're saying that there doesn't have to be contradiction, they can in fact represent the same thing.

AK: That's right. The same concept. And the Africans would have understood more. But now if I went home and want to do that, it's sacrilege.

LS: So when they had that bishop, they really went along a path that --- it was sort of like a foreign church was ---

AK: Yeah, yeah ---

LS: --- transplanted to Sierra Leone. I see. They wouldn't be open to that at all?

AK: That's right. And that's what I thought that we were doing. We were trying to --- we were denying our own culture. We were denying what is ours in favor of something that we will never be or we will never understand. Because the Western culture remains uniquely Western.

LS: But now here you are in the United States and you don't have ---

AK: Yeah, I don't have that, but I am still African. Just as I go round in neighborhoods and see African Americans and they've been isolated from Africa for so many years. They would think that there is nothing African in them. And that's a big lie. Until I started visiting their homes, then started to see that some African in them had trickled down. For example, the way the black Americans take care of their old people, they don't go and abandon them in nursing homes. They take their own parents in their homes and take care of them until their demise. That's an African tradition. The way the older people have influenced and controlled the younger minds and molded the kids. Boys, the juveniles that I worked with in () Heights revered their grandmothers. Because the grandma was ---

LS: Was tough.

AK: Was tough, no-nonsense woman. And that's my grandmother. She stepped to the plate when my mom died and she was the mother, the grandmother, she has raised her own children, but knowing that I needed a mother whenever at home, she never spared the rod and made me conform. Even though I played tricks like a young man to -- young boy to fool her, I never succeeded in fooling her. She always was a step ahead of me.

LS: Are there any African prisoners in the prison where you work?

AK: Yeah, there was and they moved them. There were a few of them from Liberia.

LS: Were they there on immigration problems?

AK: I really didn't ask, but I did talk to two of them. Now they have gone to Camp Hill prison.

LS: Because I know that now when people arrive without --- when they are out of status, while they're deciding their asylum ---

AK: Well, no, they send them to federal prisons.

LS: This is a state prison?

AK: Federal prison is where when you violate immigration laws, you are sent ---

LS: And you're in a state prison?

AK: I'm in a state prison.

LS: What's your social group like here? You've been here for twenty-five years. Do you have friends from all different places? Do you spend a lot of time with Sierra Leoneans or what's your social circle like?

AK: Ha! I have friends among Nigerians, Africans, French, Hmong(?), island people, Jamaicans. I have friends among black Americans, white people. I tend to get along with many ethnic people because of my divergent background.

LS: Are you very involved in the Sierra Leonean community?

AK: Yes, I am. I have been involved in many aspects. First of all, I had wanted to start a church like Abu has done. For Africans, Sierra Leoneans especially. In our days here in the late seventies and early eighties, immigration was very tough on Sierra Leoneans, on all Africans or foreigners in this area. And so it's something that I had regretted, also. If we were congregating as Africans, you would find the FBIs coming into that meeting or going around there and this kept people from coming there because some of them were here illegally. And they will think that if they went there to worship, somebody was going to nab them, and put in jail, or have them deported.

LS: It's interesting, 'cause the pressure is really off now because of ---

AK: Now, this is why you have people like Joseph Abu starting a ministry because it's getting better for them because people are not afraid to congregate. The immigration policies are becoming a lot more liberal. Especially the refugee programs and things like that. It's nice for Africans in America, especially in the last eight years has been really great.

LS: So Joseph Abu just kind of started this at a time when it could work?

AK: That's right.

LS: And he's got a lot of people from different --- he's got Catholics there ---

AK: Sure, sure!

LS: He's got --- I mean, it seems that nationality takes precedent over denomination.

AK: That's right. And I take my hat off to him. He is doing a great job. The other reason is that Africans who came here during our time also attended churches that were friendly to them. Like my church is Saint Thomas United Methodist Church of () in the Northeast. That's the church that seventeen years ago when I moved into here I associated with. And so I become like a member of the family in that church. And so now to get out of that church and form another church would mean that I am leaving my family behind. Because most of the children that were --- I found when they went to Sunday school with my children, and we were teaching them seventeen years ago, these are now adults. They are now in their twenties, most of them in their thirties. And we have raised them together. Their mothers, they have really helped my wife raise my children and we all worked together in that neighborhood and so we become one. And that's our home church. So you'll find that among older African who have been here, who have already been established with other churches, that to remove them from their church to go to Joseph Abu --- I know that a lot of other families who are the old type, who came twenty, thirty years ago ---

LS: They're not there?

AK: They're not there.

LS: He's got a very young congregation.

AK: That's right.

LS: And I've also noticed, every time I've been there, that he's got more and more really young people that look like they may just recently have come as refugees.

AK: That's right.

LS: And that's probably a very nice setting for them, just to feel --- You know, he preaches in Krio a little bit.

AK: That's right. And sometimes speak Mende.

LS: But you're right. And I have talked other Sierra Leoneans who are Catholic, whatever, and they are in their own church. They're there, they're not going to change.

AK: No, they're not going to change.

LS: Do Sierra Leoneans tend to meet or congregate in any other specific places besides this church in Philadelphia?

AK: We have what we call, ethnic places or ethnic groups like the Tegloma.

LS: Are you a member of that?

AK: No. We started the Tegloma.

LS: So you were part of the ---

AK: I started initiating --- When I first came here, the political atmosphere in Sierra Leone was very, very repulsive towards the Mendes. The man in the --- then Siaka Stevens was in power and being a Northerner, the Mendes were opposed to the party, his All People's Congress. Even though he had a one party state, he still was afraid of the Mendes rising over him and clinging onto their Sierra Leone People's Party. And as a result a whole lot of Mendes were suppressed, victimized and some of us fled the country because of that.

LS: These were people of your generation or younger?

AK: My generation. And people even older. But people of my generation, most of them who were from colleges, who were young like I was in the seventies and eighties. You know, I was in college in England during the UP movement. We were having () and everything, we were radical. We went back home with those ideas. And we were agitating and we found this oppressive government. And the best weapon was not to give you any job. And that the reason you return so fast when you went. And this happened to a lot of Mende boys who have been educated somewhere else in the Western world. Like in England and Canada, in Australia, who went back home and could not find any jobs. So when we came back here, the

embassy --- there was a man in the embassy called the ambassador --- I mean, the, he was not the ambassador, he was the consul ---

LS: The Consular Officer?

AK: Yeah. Whenever we had any little problems or somebody died or one of our students died or something, we went to him. He would say, "Well, look. This is not a SLPP embassy. This embassy is representing APC and we cannot do anything for you." And so the embassy instead of becoming a representation of the whole nation of Sierra Leone, it became a representation of people who belonged to the All Peoples Congress. And this one, a man called Mr. Koka(?). He's dead now, late Teacher Koka, he was an old teacher, he called us all together and said that we need to have a group that looks after our own interest because the government is not doing anything for us. The embassy is not doing anything for us. And so we got together and that's how Tegloma was born.

LS: And "tegloma" is what? Is that the name of a Mende ---

AK: That's a Mende word for "development" or "progress."

LS: But you're no longer part of this group?

AK: I wasn't. I became defunct in the sense that the first constitution they wrote was really an answer to the problem of ethnicity and the Tegloma therefore became predominantly a Mende organization. And as a minister, a religious person at home, who have worked in the North among the Tenmes and among the common people, among the Limba(?) people, if I came and joined myself to Tegloma --- I knew I wanted to go home --- and if I went to those places and start to preach, somebody's going to say, "Now this man you see here preaching brotherly love, is a diehard Mende conservative." [laughs] Okay? In short, my Christian principles wouldn't let me become a Tegloma person. I am a Mende. I believe in the Mende tradition. I believe in Mende people taking care of themselves. But I don't believe in Mende exclusive in Sierra Leone.

LS: Yeah, I understand.

AK: Then, I am perpetuating Nazism. [pause] My background as a Mende man, as a Muslim, grew up in the Konaland, worked among the Temne people, live in a home run by a white woman who was my mother. I don't feel that I share those passions with the rest of Mende people. [laughs]

LS: The Sierra Leonean population here seems very fragmented from ---

AK: Sure! This is the reason! I am just give you a rundown of what happened.

LS: I mean, a North American Mandingo association and this that and the other ---

AK: Because as soon as we came, because of that thing --- we used to have a Sierra Leone Students Union, which embraced all nationalities, all tribes of Sierra Leoneans. And then this APC thing happened. When I was in college in England, we had the Sierra Leone Students Union, representatives come from England, and we had conventions here in America. In fact that was my first taste of America, in New York, when we came to Manhattan. We drove from the airport. My friends took me up and then we drove and I saw all these black people and I said, "My god, this is unlike in England." Because in England, I live in a very little village where we were the only black people around. So here I come, it was big, everywhere you turn you can look hard to see a white man. And the other people white people you can see were Jews in the funny hats and long beards. [both laugh]

LS: It must have seemed really different to you.

AK: So I'm saying, "Where am I?" It was all what Americans ---

LS: Did that attract you?

AK: Yes! It did! It was very intriguing. You know, and I said, "Wow!" It opened my eyes that day. We've been learning about slavery and slave trade and all that. But look! You know? And I really felt that when I got the opportunity to come to America, I was coming to that America.

LS: Then you went to Ohio. [AK laughs] And it was a little bit different, huh?

AK: I went to a village called Delaware.

LS: That was more like being in England.

AK: 100% Republican! No --- uh, that's not the swear word! [laughs]

LS: Well, this newer association now that you're --- the United Sierra Leoneans for Peace and Development --- do you see that as a way to move beyond?

AK: We feel --- our philosophy is that we see that the only way Sierra Leone will survive as a nation is by all of us putting aside. We are not saying that people should empty themselves of tribal allegiances, but that they should be able to get rid of some of the fears and idiosyncrasies and prejudices that we have held so long about each other. And that we need to dispel that in order to become a nation. Because the survival of that nation depends on our solidarity.

LS: Are you pleased with how this new association is working?

AK: Yes, there are a few people but they are committed. They're not coming there because of tribal allegiance or because of money or any other thing, they are coming there just because of that reason. And I think that it's genuine and if we continue hammering this message home as to many people that () we will revive the old Sierra Leonean Student Union, even though it was a student union but we want to replace that with ---

LS: Former Student Union?

AK: Yes, Former Student Union --- to national organization of Sierra Leoneans. So that for our own benefit in this country, to work together, to help each other, not to work against each other, and that will become the stepping stone, a foundation. For building a peaceful Sierra Leone.

LS: Well, Mr. Sheriff came to a meeting the other day that I helped to organize at Bartram High School, because they were having a lot of problems with their Liberian and Sierra Leonean students in the sense that they are marginalized, they are victimized, they have a lot of --- they feel discriminated against by both teachers and students and --- So we had a meeting and he represented the Sierra Leonean community and your association, with someone also from the Liberian association. And a lot of teachers and a lot of students came in and talked. And probably Mr. Sheriff will give a report whenever you do your next meeting, but the idea is to have associations come in to start doing these kind of interventions and to help mentor the students because a lot of them are very lost. And they feel very ---

AK: Well, this is one of the reasons why we're here, we formed this, to help this new-coming Sierra Leoneans to socially acclimatize to the way things are done. Even me, who attended colleges in England, and came here, I had difficulties when I came to graduate school in Ohio. The reason is that the educational system I was coming from, the British educational system, was a different kind of system where you learn all the thing and then go to the end of the year and take a year-end exam. And in America, it's cumulative. There is assimilation. So when you come from those two priorities(?), you ought to have a difficulty. There are areas where the African student may have known a little bit more, or have more information. And there are areas he knows zilch. American education is so broadly based. Even at college level you have electives and everything. And there, in Africa and in England, is major. You study your major and you exhaust it.

LS: Yeah, yeah. It is different. It is very different.

AK: It is good. You know your subject in-depth. But then you're parochial. You just limited in scope. Whereas here, when you get a liberal arts education, when somebody's talking about psychology you know a little about that. You know a little bit about sociology. You know about history. You can at least say something. You won't be that stupid in those areas. In fact, some science, when people are talking about physics and things like that, even though you may not understand all the quantum and all the other words that they gonna use. But at least you know the basic working knowledge of energy, centrifugal force, and things like that, at least you can talk a little bit in educated language, which sometimes get me in trouble, too.

LS: I think having that kind of orientation for newcomers sounds like it's very important. That's done in kind of systematic way, 'cause --- In fact, the last time I was at one of your meetings and you said that they want to help people, just let them know what a job interview was about. That's an excellent idea, because that's not obvious. Especially if you might come from a place where you think that ---

AK: How to write a resume, how to go to a job interview, how to write even an application for a job.

LS: It's not obvious. I remember the first time we met, we talked a little bit about some sort of group you'd been part of at Temple that was a diaspora thing?

AK: Yes.

LS: What was it?

AK: I was working with a man called Jesse Woods, Obidiah Johnson, and Dr. Ashanti. And it was called a Pan African Movement.

LS: What year was this?

AK: Oh, way back in the eighties.

LS: And how did you get connected up with them?

AK: I was working with the Black Ministers Caucus in Philadelphia and I met Michael Eugene Graves. He had a church in Germantown on, I think, Price Street. He's been in Sierra Leone many times and I met him in the meeting and he was talking about some of the things he has done for Sierra Leone. He knew some people that I knew. And he invited me to the church. So I went there to preach there one day. And in the service was Obidiah Johnson and a man called Jesse Woods. They have worked with Reverend Leon Sullivan.

LS: Oh, okay.

AK: And they had gone to West Africa, to Liberia, to Guinea, and to Sierra Leone. And they'd done extensive work in establishing the OIC.

LS: OIC International?

AK: International. So that's how I came to know them. And while we associated, we formed a group called Pan African Movement. We used to meet every month, once every month, to discuss the African American relationships and also how we can network and work together as one people, regardless of the bitterness of our history, the slave ---

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

AK: --- projects that Dr. Ashanti in Africa called Afro Fest. He said that the Afro Fest idea was to have all Africans, in all spheres of life, meet yearly or every five years or something, in one place where you have African artists, African writers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, builders, all kinds of spheres of life, meet for a month to exhibit their work. And in exhibiting their work they will be giving lectures, they will be giving seminars, wherein we will exchange ideas and experience.

LS: So it would do for Africans and African Americans?

AK: African everywhere, not only African Americans but black people from England, London, Guinea --- the New Guinea Africans, people of African origin, from all over the world will converge in one city and be there to exhibit their work.

LS: Did that ever happen?

AK: It did happen. It did, but there was one that took place in Nigeria in 1975 or 1976. It was very successful. And this was organized also by the All African --- Organization of African Unity.

LS: Oh, okay.

AK: Well, they didn't organize it, but they blessed it. They gave their blessing to it. But it was a grassroot of thing like that, and after that, those of us who went and saw this thing ---

LS: Did you go there, to Nigeria?

AK: Yeah, I was there in Africa then. Those of us who saw the work, we were influenced and came back --- When I came to America, my goal was: we can start that here! And get ourselves reacquainted, reconciled, and find common things that can help each other across the ocean. We no longer like a Marcus Garvy militant thing that move everybody back to Africa and things like that, but at least we can revive that culture in you, so that you know who you are and keep that alive in you.

LS: So did it work? It didn't work?

AK: Well, it did work for a while. We had a chapter in Columbus and we had one in Atlanta, we were trying all over, but then it was just a small group. And we didn't have the money and the publicity to make it national. And so as such it just died. Out of which we were also going to be linked with what is

called Afrocentrism and things like that. My own contribution was, or my own idea was, and I still share that, that Africa is a very vast continent which lack manpower, which lack technological manpower, scientific manpower. That there a whole a lot black educated people here. If we can link their resources out there, with the knowledge here, we can help each other across the continent.

LS: Isn't that sort of what Leon Sullivan's African – African American Summits were trying to do? And they're still going. They seem to be very successful.

AK: That's what I'm trying. That's the same thing. That why I say I was linked with Leon Sullivan. I name all these people who I have worked, Leon Sullivan, maybe that brushed off on me. But I found in that, in Leon Sullivan's, that approach that, for example, so many --- downtown areas --- like, let's take North Philly. It doesn't have any industries, it doesn't have any factories.

LS: It doesn't have anything now.

AK: Now here is certain places like Gabon, Yaounde --- uhh, Cameroon --- that have vast forests, that has mahogany, teak wood, black wood. Let's have an industry. We start a little furniture store or a factory let's say in Cameroon, in Yaounde, of this exotic furniture, and bring it to North Philly. And we finish it, and sell it. It gives jobs to people in North Philly. It gives jobs to people in Africa. And both use the resources () to better their positions, their situations in the world.

LS: Did you ever try that idea?

AK: I have floated a company called US - Africa Venture. It is still current in Harrisburg and this is the idea behind that. I was gonna, the thing I did was, wrong thing I did was to float it as a profit oriented. Maybe if I done it as a non-profit organization, then I wouldn't be paying taxes to keep it alive.

LS: Yes, if it was non-profit.

AK: But I did it as a company and now I have to revamp it, change the name and re-register it as a non-profit organization.

LS: You know, there's kind of a model --- not a model, but something that might be like that. The Mennonites have something called Ten Thousand Villages. It's a store on Lancaster Avenue in Bryn Mawr. And they set up --- they have suppliers, it's non-profit --- they have set up suppliers who do all

kinds of crafts and things. And it's the kind of thing you could buy in other places in the US, but it's not expensive because it's non-profit.

AK: That's right.

LS: And they're creating work for people in all these --- they're from Guinea, they're from Africa, they're from Asia, they're from all over the place. So it kind of sounds like a similar thing. But you can tell it's a non-profit because it's a lot less than it would be in an Africa craft store or something like that, where things can be outrageously priced.

AK: Priced, yes. And people can just go in and pick anything without paying an arm and a leg for it.

LS: But they also have picture of the producers and they have things so that you actually see ---

AK: Not only that, but like if you have a little factory out there, let them bring, and we finish it here.

LS: And you create work on both sides?

AK: Yeah, you create work on both sides.

LS: Well, it's a great idea. I know that's what everyone was hoping with Clinton, that he would open up all this stuff, and everybody had hopes, and --- once we have a president --- [laughs]

AK: Don't bring that, don't bring that to this conversation.

LS: You don't want to bring that up?

AK: I don't believe --- it's just like --- it reminds of a Third World political struggle.

LS: You know the President of Uganda said he would send in observers for the next election?

AK: That's just teasing America.

LS: I know. When you came to the United States for the first time, did you have trouble understanding the English here? Or did people ever tell you they had problems understanding your English?

AK: [laughing] You're funny --- exactly ---

LS: I just wanted to know because I know a lot of Liberians have said they have a lot of ---

AK: Yes, yes. I came with a friend. We were in the seminary. He come from Liberia. He is called Leo, Leo Simpson. He's a Liberian. And we used to spend weekends with a friend of ours, Don () [name].

He is a white man, but he has adopted children from Korea, black American children. It was almost like

the United Nations. So one weekend, we went to spend the weekend with them for Thanksgiving weekend, and he was working in his garage while his wife was preparing a meal in the kitchen. We were watching TV. And the wife said, "Hey, where are the kids?" And since I was helping Don in the garage, they asked Leo to go look for the kids. Leo left. He came back and said, "I didn't see any kids, but some children were playing in the churchyard." Do you understand what the joke?

LS: They --- they ---

AK: He didn't see any kids.

LS: Oh! And he thought it was ---

AK: Goats! [laughs]

LS: They don't use the word "kids" as another word for "children"?

AK: No. He said, "Wait a minute, I saw some children playing in the churchyard, but I didn't see any kids." And Heather looked at him and said, "Now, where are my children?" Leo went, "I said, they are playing in the churchyard." "But you said you didn't see any kids?" "Yeah, I didn't see any goats!"

[laughs]

LS: I betcha there are a lot of Americans don't even know that "kids" even means "goats."

AK: Another day, another time, we just drove to this hot dog store. We must have been in this country for about a week or so. So they were selling street food and said we want to buy some cheap street food and eat. Because we had arrived on the weekend, banks were closed, we have all this African money, and we cannot cash it. So we have few dollars. We don't want to buy expensive food because we couldn't afford it. So in the morning, at the hotel we slept in, they had prepared sausage and egg for breakfast. We ate it and we didn't know --- he didn't know, I knew because I had been in England. I know sausage. He hadn't, this was his first time of eating sausage and eggs. Now I didn't know, what I didn't know was that they have something here called hot dogs. Okay? I saw this thing selling and we both felt it was sausages. So we bought this thing and they put it in the bread and put all the kinds of things in it. And Leo insisted, he said, "How do you call this?" And I said, "Hey, man, they are sausages!" And the

vendor said, "They are dogs! Hot dogs!" He had taken a bite [laughs] and I just said, "How can you eat ---"
 "[dissolves into laughter]"

LS: Did the man explain that it wasn't dog?

AK: He walked away, said, "() your money! You people can kill somebody in this country. You giving dogs to people now. What else are you going to be selling on the street?" And there are many, many, many, many times we told the story to Americans and they kept on, "These are not real dogs. They are just called dogs. It's a nickname, it's a slang. But this is not dogs." "And why do you call it dog?" One of those American English that we did not understand. The other one was a curse word. We were driving in our car, we just got a car --- excited --- so we were driving this car and we came back to this university parking lot. And as soon as we start to park this car, somebody was trying to wait for the person to pull out. Now we didn't notice. We just came, as soon as the man pulled, we just go out and park right in his place. And the man, the frustrated man in the other car, said, "Motherfuck," you know, something like that. [laughs]

LS: And you said, "What?"

AK: An "f" word!

LS: You'd never heard that before?

AK: Uh-uh. Leo went and opened the door on the man's car. Leo was a big, tall, huge man, you know, big Mandingo, huge fellow. Picked this little, tiny, weeny man by the neck and the man was dangling, his feet was kicking, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" This was exactly how Leo talked: "Did you say that I do that to my mother?" [laughs]

LS: That must have been a hard couple of months for this guy. [laughs] Except they have exactly that in insult in Senegal, the same thing that you do your mother, it's not literal you know? [both laugh]

LS: Do your children speak Mende? Is your wife a Mende speaker?

AK: Yeah, my wife speaks Mende.

LS: And your children, do they ever?

AK: No.

LS: It was just impossible ---

AK: It's just impossible, because they would go to school and then when they come back home --- they didn't manage to because we constantly speaking Mende, the two of us, so their ears were (). And one day, they spoke Krio without anybody teaching them.

LS: Where did they hear that? With other Sierra Leoneans?

AK: From home. From other Sierra Leoneans who come home and talk. And one day, I was walking by their room and heard them speaking Krio to each other. And I called, "Mary, come! The children are speaking Krio." And we were surprised and we said we were never going to speak Krio again in this house.

LS: You didn't want them to speak Krio?

AK: No. You see, like parents we would speak Krio, you know we thought they wouldn't hear. Like the most intimate words that we would say to each other, we would say it in Krio, and so they picked on that and they started speaking it. And I told Mary and she said, "We should stop saying some words, you know, when we want to be intimate, these words husband and wife use, we can't do that now in Krio. But these children can speak Krio, they can understand it!"

LS: You underestimated your children?

AK: It was so embarrassing to know that they could speak, and they would begin to talk all the kind of rude words we said in Krio, between the two of us in front of them, and the words that can even make the devil blush. [laughs]

LS: Do you and your wife eat mostly Sierra Leonean food or do you eat all kinds of food?

AK: Yes, yes, we eat all kinds, we eat American food, Sierra Leonean food, but mostly Sierra Leonean dishes.

LS: Where do you shop for it?

AK: We have stores in West Philly and we have one in Frankford.

LS: Or you do? An African market?

AK: Well, it's a Korean market and ---

LS: At the Korean store you can even get ---

AK: Yes, the Koreans sell African stuff, too. And so that's one of the things we Africans have not done. We need to have, like you said, a common place.

LS: Well, there's the Freetown Market in Southwest Philly.

AK: Hmmm.

LS: A lot of people go there.

AK: Yeah, I know Freetown Market, I've been there but I am talking about --- these Korean stores are bigger and have more stuff in it.

LS: They probably don't have Vimto though?

AK: Oh, no. Oh, yes, they do have it! But the Korean stores have palm wine.

LS: Ooooooh, okay.

AK: And you don't find that in the Freetown Market.

LS: How interesting, interesting. I've seen some groups --- there's a couple of communities that have restaurants. The people from Ivory Coast do, and also the Senegalese, and those end up being really big common meeting places.

AK: For them, yeah.

LS: But I guess there's no, there's no restaurant ---

AK: We used to have an African house, a Sierra Leonean place where it was like a bar, disco place, to get together.

LS: Where was that?

AK: That was on Chestnut. 52nd and Chestnut, no, 52nd and Walnut. But I don't know what happened.

The man, Augustine Susewa(?), was the owner. I don't know whether he sold the business or he stopped doing it ---

LS: And people, did you used to go there for meetings?

AK: Yeah, we used to go there for meetings. And it was nice, but then for over the years now I haven't seen people patronize or doing it.

LS: Your children don't speak Mende, but when you try to transmit kinds of values to them. Have you have been more successful at that?

AK: Yeah. Like my oldest daughter, she is now twenty-three, graduated from Albright. She is very much into African culture. She sometimes mixes it up with Jamaican culture, like having her hair dread-locked, but she even had told her mother that she would like to go and join the women's secret society in Sierra Leone.

LS: Has she been to Sierra Leone? Have they been back?

AK: No, she never ---

LS: They've never been?

AK: Yeah. We trying that they go in the New Year, took them, and they see their ancestral land. There's one in the army. The fourteen-year-old was born in Africa. Mary, in 1986 went home, her uncle died as she went home, and she was pregnant. She took the body home. And while she was there, she had a baby. [laughs] We manage to bring the baby --- she left it there --- because the baby was too young to travel with her. But after --- she left it with her sister. After her sister died, we went back and picked the baby up.

LS: And how old was she?

AK: She was five years when we brought her.

LS: So the first five years of her life she was there?

AK: Yeah. Now when she was there, oh my God, she, when she came newly, she and I were so close, we speak Mende, we sing in Mende, we dance and tell stories. One day, she came from school and I speak Mende like I was talking to a dog. She wouldn't hear a word of it, and she would --- now she sometimes manage a few things, like "give me water to drink," she know that, "pick my shoe up," "goes wash your dishes." We say that in Mende and she does it.

LS: But she ---

AK: She wouldn't converse in Mende, like she used to converse with us. We miss that very much. And I used to tease her about it, I say, "You are so dumb. How you can forget a language?"

LS: Oh, but children do.

AK: I know, but it just like teasing her.

LS: What do you miss most about Sierra Leone?

AK: Everything. My friends that I was born with, and grew up with, the things that we did, and the camaraderie, you know, the nostalgic. Growing up in Africa is so unique in that it's like a whole village is like a classroom for children. Every parent is a teacher and a caretaker, and whether somebody is related to you or not, you are all brothers and sisters. And you grow up in that atmosphere. And work together. And look after each other. I mean, if I did something in part of the town before I got home I would have been --- flogged or beaten up or scolded by an old granny, and by the time I got home, Grandma would be waiting for me, or Daddy would be waiting for me, for more spanking and things like that. But my friends, the ones I grew up with, we always like we children from the same parents. Those of my age group, especially those that we joined the secret societies together, we were bonded. And when I came home, many times I have returned homelike I've never left. They've all come round me and test me all kinds of ways whether I remember things or whether I still hold those things. So when I think of home, they become very paramount in my memory.

LS: If you had grown up in Freetown, it might not have been as different as here?

AK: Yeah.

LS: But with growing up in the village ---

AK: In the village, yeah. Then the other thing's like the free life, the outdoors, the weather, and the outdoors, so great. I can leave home and go in the jungle, go out in the bushes and walk on mountains and near big rivers, fish, just be alone when I want to be alone.

LS: Not like city life.

AK: Not like in Freetown. No cars, no fumes, no nothing, just listen to the birds and the animals and the monkeys chattering in the trees, and the breeze, no pollution.

LS: Do you think that if you had a chance to go back and everything was fine, that you could readapt to that life easily?

AK: Umm-hmm. I went three years ago. And it was a test for me. I avoided the city. The very first day I went, I had left the city. I went way back in Kenema and I didn't stop in Kenema. I got in the little vehicle, a public transportation. You know how they pack those people in those little vehicles?

LS: Yes, I do.

AK: And we went back, way back into the interior where you see cars maybe once a week they come. And I lived there and the simplicity of life there, of the people, and you --- The first month I lived there, the same thing that came to me was solely breathing. There was no bill to pay. There was no collector calling my phone, there was no phone ringing. And I just woke up in the morning, follow my friends who went to the bushes, fished for breakfast, hunted deer or whatever we went to hunt, and eat it, and had all games we used to play. I've gotten rusty and forgotten and I'm little clumsy, playing some of these games. Like those games we play with boards and with the seeds and the ---

LS: Okay, I know what you mean.

AK: And we play that and we work a sweat out, and things like that. It's just the language, the ways of expression. Our language is so rich that people talk like they're talking in parables. If you're not a Mende, you can understand Mende and you can really talk it if you are born there, but if you're not a real Mende --- When a Mende man speak --- Mende is like French. You've gotta be a French man to understand French, because French is so diplomatic that every word means two words, and that's how Mende is. And even though you can put a string of words together, they don't mean anything to anybody who hears it but the person who is a typical Mende. That's how my brothers test me.

LS: They want to know if your ---

AK: If I, if I ---

LS: If you're still a Mende?

AK: If I'm still a Mende. They used to accuse me: "You don't speak Mende. You speak English Mende." That would be the first test they will give me when I am home. They say something and I answer, they say "Phht! You didn't hear this man!" Then we say there, "[speaking Mende]" Then I say, giving think

about it a little bit, and I say “Ahhh, yeah! Okay, okay, okay!” You know? Then they bring you back, like, I can’t explain it.

LS: Do you think you will retire there? Would you and your wife like to go back there?

AK: Definitely, definitely. I hope this war is going to end quickly. Because there is a whole lot I have learned in America that I want to put it to practice. Even though I am getting older, but I want to have more years, or the little years that I have left, to affect some of the things that I had always wanted affect and see happening.

LS: When you go to your village and you say that it so wonderful and so different from here, people must be thinking the same about your life here?

AK: Oh, yeah! Right now, everybody want to come to the United States. Because here they feel its safe, there’s no war, there’s a lot of work. And when there’s lot of work, money, and you can do anything you want to. They think we’re all wealthy. And the only thing why people want to come here: safety and money and the security of a job and life, security of life.

LS: And if somebody had the chance to come here, would you recommend they come?

AK: Yeah. Because the experience is good. The experience is good. However, I would like him to come and learn all what he can, but go back and help his country. Because we can’t have a brain drain, we can’t have a country escaping its own problems, coming to the West, to America. And leave the country - -- that’s, that’s --- is not fair. It’s also burdening, putting a burden on the American taxpayers. I think, we must develop our country. We must be physically responsible, we must be transparent, we have fiscal transparency of our leaders, we must have fiscal responsibility, we must energize our economic infrastructure at home and become partners with America. Not as a place of refuge, but a place where we can come as tourists and see the things, and learn, and go back and implement them. I love America very much, but I wouldn’t want to die here. Not because America is bad, not because there is no soil that I can buried in --- I know I can. When I’m dead, I have no choice over that. But what I’m saying is, I think I have gathered a whole lot out of American life that if return home ---

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

