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Attah-Mensah, Nana

Attah-Mensah, Nana. Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Nana Atta-Mensah
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edwards
Date: May 16, 2007

Dr. Jane Edwards (JE): Can you tell me about your migration experiences? When did you come to the Bronx, or the U.S.?

Nana Atta-Mensah (NM): Yes, I came to the Bronx in 1979, and I first settled in Manhattan, in Harlem, for about three years. And I moved to the Bronx, and I'm living in the Bronx seventeen years now. My reason for moving to the Bronx is the rent is way cheap, there are a lot of Africans in the Bronx that I can interact with. So I found myself very closer to them than living in Harlem.

JE: What about the countries that you went to? Because there are so many Africans, when they come to the U.S. they go through other countries.

NM: For me I was living in Germany before. I left Germany, to Ghana, and from Ghana I came to America. So I just come directly from Africa to America. But some of them pass through so many routes, some of them pass through maybe Europe, Canada, South America, and leaving direct from Africa.

JE: So how long did you live in Germany?

NM: I lived there for about ten years.

JE: Then you went back to Ghana, and then you went to the U.S.?

NM: That's correct.

JE: I understand that you are doing your business in the Bronx earlier. Would you mind to tell me about your business?

NM: Yes, I have an accounting business and travel and tour, one time fair, and also you know like a small business. Like documentation, if you need a resume or you need anything to be faxed we also do it there. And it's on Gun Hill Rd, 250 E Gun Hill Rd. in the Bronx.

JE: And what kind of community are you serving?

NM: I am serving the community that have, groups like Spanish-Americans, Africans. About two percent are white in that community, so it's a nice community, I love it.

JE: Can you tell me about your family? Are you married, you have children?

NM: Yes, I am married with only one wife, as you know in Africa you can marry more than one. But in America you can't do that. I told her when I go back to Africa I'm not going to do that. I have five children and the last one is about seventeen years old.

JE: Can you tell me about your job? Like before you opened this business what did you do before?

NM: When I came here I was working at a gas station as gas attendant, a gas station attendant. And later I find a job with a scaffold company from there I started taxi, yellow cab downtown. I took off my work to go to school to become a registered nurse so that things can be better for us. In 2000 I started my different degree, accounting, and African American studies. I graduated in 2005 and started my business on Gun Hill Rd.

JE: So which university or college you graduate from?

NM: Yes, I went to Lehman College, which is City University of New York. Lehman College is a senior college, even prior to filling out my education-- inaudible.

JE: And you mentioned something about doing a project in Africa, like giving scholarships for children. Can you talk about that?

NM: Yes, God has blessed us to be able to acquire knowledge from here and you shouldn't forget where you come from because in Africa you guys are a family. As you know, if you are here you have to support your family back home, your mom, your father, your uncles, your nieces, your sisters, and brothers. But providing food for them is not enough, what you have to do you have to develop a program that will help them in the long-term basis. But short-term

would be giving them food to sustain them. But I plan to have an education foundation for my people and for my community. Because education is very important, at my age I was able to go college and have my first degree work, I want also to have my master's degree. So with this then it is the only thing that can be provided to them that can't be taken away from them is education. So what I am doing right now is that I have an education foundation in my name Atta-Mensah's education foundation, and this money come from my own pocket. Helping them to finish junior high school, to senior high school and to a university.

JE: So the children are they in Ghana or are they here?

NM: They are all in Ghana. They are all in Ghana. These Africans really need our help because after all that I can't over there to help them.

JE: The other thing is I want to know about which part of Ghana do you come from?

NM: I come from the central part which is the Ashanti region and I am Ashanti, Ashanti speak Twi. And the Ashanti are one of the greatest tribe in African history.

JE: What about the other groups in Ghana? You mentioned something about the people in the coastal region.

NM: Yes, the Ashantis come from a community called Akans, and Akan is comprised of Fantes, Akuapems, Asinis, and a lot more. There are about six or seven and we come from central region, eastern region, western region, and the coastal area, which is by the Atlantic ocean. Those people that come from that region some are called Ghants and some are called the Fantes. The Fantes are also Akans because we speak almost the same language but different dialect. But the Ghant people speak a totally different language. It's not one of the Akan so that's how it is.

JE: And we talked about a system of the government within the Ashanti community and you mentioned that you have queens and kings, can you talk about that a little bit?

NM: Yes, the Ashanti's have their own way of life and their tradition. We believe in our ancestors, we believe in our elders and our kings and queens and chiefs. The kings are the larger community and in the smaller community they are called chiefs. You understand? And the queens are the same thing. In the smaller community they are called Obaping. It means an elder in the community They are our leaders and they are the kings because and we have the elders who support the chief in case of war, in case of any problems. The kings or the chief summons his or her elders to come together and then they plan before they inform the community what to do. So you respect them and you had them before the white man came to Ghana or Africa. So you have been dealing with them until Ghana's government became a political sector. Have respect and also pay very important attention to the kings, queens, and the queen mothers. There within the community, they know much about the community than even the President himself. And also, even with the political or the empees who represent the various areas, so that's how it is.

JE: Do you have like kings and queens in the Bronx here?

NM: Definitely, you have the Ashanti's queen you have the quapums we have all this in the Bronx. But not all in the Bronx, we have also in Queens, also in Manhattan and the various five boroughs. But I live in the Bronx for, I was one time a king for the Bronx. I was one time the king of the Bronx, who is under the king of the Ashantis, because the five boroughs each have a kingdom and then all the five boroughs come together and then you have the king of the Ashantis that are over all boroughs. Which we elect them every four years, and even with the king of the Bronx or the other boroughs go through elections every four years, that's how it is.

JE: So the people that live in the Bronx--.

NM: Are members of the association called Asanteman Association, they elect.

JE: So the election happen every four years?

NM: Yes, according to the constitution we have.

JE: So this association it has a constitution, the regulations of the elections and everything?

NM: It is an NGO, a non-governmental organization, which has been registered by the State Department, you understand, so they have the power to do all these things. And this association has about two thousand membership.

JE: So from all over Ghana?

NM: From the Ashantis only. It is open even if you have some African Americans who are members of that association. It is free to the public, if you want to come and join it is okay with us. Because the other one, they have their own sheiks and kings too.

JE: That's a different part of Ghana.

NM: A different part of Ghana tradition. You have the Ewes Ghans, you have the Kwapuns, you have Acumoons, you have so many that we have, bring the people together.

JE: What do you think this coming together of different groups of Ghana helped the younger generation of the Ghanaian community in the Bronx?

NM: It let them know where they come from. Preserve the culture, and to respect their elders, because in Africa we respect our elders. That's why if our elders die they become our ancestors. I mean we still call them and also honor them because before the white man came you were having that kind of tradition in our culture. Then the babo came, and then the babo done say you shouldn't respect your elders, you understand? That's why—in audible—you have our saints. So our ancestors are our saints and you respect them because they were once the leaders in our family, so you can't forget your leader. You will one time become a leader which also means you will be remembered one day.

JE: About religion, can you tell me about what do you practice here in the Bronx? What kind of religion for example?

NM: So the religion is Christianity, Muslim, and also maybe some idol worshippers. Which is not really, about .05 percent of the population do that. The idol worshippers, but Christians are about sixty percent and the rest would be the non-churchgoers and also the Muslims. The Muslims have a mosque here they go to them and worship with other Africans in the mosque. And also the Christians have their churches, the same churches they were attending in Ghana or in Africa. They have also here. Sometimes they invite the reverends and bishops to come to worship with them. And some of them have bought their own building, rented the place, but maybe ten percent have their own building and that means the larger congregation bought their own. But the smaller congregation rent the place and worship therein, worshiping times, Sundays and also for example the Roman Catholic Church you can't have your own. They go to the local community Roman Catholic Church, after the Americans or the Spanish worship. So they can speak their own language and understand themselves. And they have priests from their community who is also maybe a Ghanaian or kind of whatever who speaks the language. And perform the mass all that stuff they would like our father to do such services.

JE: When they do the different languages, how many different languages, the Ghanaian languages for example.

NM: Most of the Ghanaians understand a language called Chi or Akan, so they always use Akan they don't use any other languages. If you want to go to Ghana, they like to speak in languages the Twi or Akan. So they do that or English.

JE: Which denomination do you go to?

NM: I go to a Church of Pentecost, which I was before Roman Catholic. I left that church to go to Church of Pentecost. The Church of Pentecost was founded in Ghana in the sixties by Reverend Machian from Ireland. He came there and started church, the church have about sixty percent Ghanaian Christians.

JE: In the Bronx?

NM: No in Ghana.

JE: In Ghana.

NM: And here too about seventy percent of Ghanaian churches. Because not only in New York City, you have about one-hundred churches all over America.

JE: What about the neighborhood that you live in? Can you tell me about the position of the different nationalities in the neighborhood.

NM: Yes, the neighborhood I believe is a lot of Ghanaians, but it is a mixed neighborhood. That means there is multi, there are Spanish, white, Africans, Pakistanians, Indians, you just name it. Because it is a condominium area, I just purchased a condominium, so we can afford our rent, we can live there in this community. But there are a lot of Africans there also. Because they said Africans pay rent very well. We are nice, we don't come late, we are honest and we don't like to cause any harm or crime to anybody. So a lot of Africans are there.

JE: And in this country we know that race play a very important role in people's life. Can you tell me about relations from the Africans from the continent and the African Americans and the other nationalities in the area that you live in?

NM: In the area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which was 2005, American community survey, they have about Africans, Black Americans, constitute 12 percent, 12.1 percent of the population. And then if you check in the Bronx you have 23.6 percent for the Bronx population, which is 10.1, which is about 420,758, and you can find the Africans in here about 100,000. Who live in the Bronx, who are Africans, not African Americans. This is black or African Americans, the population is estimated at 420,758 which is 2.1 percent in the U.S. This black or African American constitute 12.1 percent.

JE: So what is the relations? Are they coexisting well or theirs is a --?

NM: The relationship between the --? Before there was a lot animosities between the black Africans and Africans, because we showed them to the white people. We came down here also to get a job and go to university. They don't have no jobs and also they laugh at us, the way we dress, the way we eat, the way we act, until you find out we have started getting yourself an education. Because education is the root of life, without education man can't survive. After going through junior high work, work in the hospital, house cleaning, and home cares and taxi driving and so on, those who were formally educated in Ghana, come down here and see the greener pastures. If they get their green card they go to school, so you understand. So now education has become part of improving Africans community. Except those who speak maybe French or other languages, which is very hard for them too, to assimilate with the American education. But the English speaking countries like Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, they are all doing very, very well. Most of the Africans live in, the whole of United States of America is Nigerians, they a lot of them, and then the Ghanaians come in.

JE: That's interesting. The other thing is about, let me say about getting jobs in the Bronx. Is it easier it to get a job or is it harder?

NM: To get a job in the Bronx is the same as in Manhattan or anywhere. But it depend upon your qualification and the kind of job you are looking for. If you are looking for car wash, the car wash has been occupied by the Spanish you know? Mexicans and all this. If you are looking for a taxi cab, taxi is also there, you can just go buy your own car and register TLC and then you know start driving it. If you want to get administrative work then you have to have qualifications. You must know about computers and you must know about the accounting, then you can get a job. But in the Bronx, the Bronx there is no job for administrative kinds unless you go to city government or to private universities, like Fordham University or maybe other ones. Then you can a job. But mostly they all work in Manhattan, that's how it goes, or own their own business.

JE: So let's go to your business, do you have partners or do you work by yourself?

NM: Yes, I had a partner before I had partnership, but now I've reduced to two which is me and one of my friends. Because business not doing all that well, it's a new business, it's very hard and it cost a lot of money to operate it. Paying rent is very expensive and having someone to have to work for you, so that place cost a lot of money. So I have only two, so I'm going to see this year, things keep going bad, I can't keep on losing money.

JE: When you started your business, what process did you go through? Like registering the business and things like that?

NM: You have to go to 161 in the Bronx to register, the State Department. And then you the businessman and you have to register with IRS to get the EI Number. And I attended a course at the Small Business Center at Lehman College to know what I needed to know and to what I need to put in place before I start the business and then everything was OK. You know sometimes very hard because they go, they only give you a normal small business credit, they go over your credit.

JE: You mean they check your credit listing?

NM: The banks because they check your credit history, before they can give you a loan. They give you a loan, if they tell you it's no good there is no need to go for the loan because he can't pay. That's how it is, that's what happened to me. I didn't want to go for a loan because –
inaudible.

JE: We know that many Africans who come here, some of them decide to stay, they don't want to go back to where they come from. Are you planning to go back to Ghana or are you going to stay here?

NM: OK let me tell you. Africans come here because of so many reasons. One of those reasons is maybe, during the sixties Africa was very shaky, politically, there were a lot of military coups

and so on. So many people just left the country because they didn't want to be arrested or maybe the government wasn't favorable to them. So they left the country and come down here. And some come here because of economical reason. When a purchase is no good it effect the economy too, so they come here to seek better living and better opportunities, so they come. Since about twenty years now, Africa is getting stabilized, especially Ghana. So economy has been a lot better, so some of us, and myself would like to go home, maybe in the next five years. Because it's better to go home and help my country to rebuild. Because I have been able to achieve an education here which I intend to pursue, as I said earlier, to have a masters degree. To help my country and my community.

JE: So how are you going to help? In the politics or in business?

NM: Politics and business probably. It will probably will be like my education foundation, politics will probably will maybe becoming a minister, probably a member of Parliament, district commissioner, or anything which I can do to help. And business would maybe be starting a very profitable business to help the business world in Africa.

JE: I want to go back to this stereotyping of Africans. How does that effect the younger generation in school? Who were born and came here young and went to school, because I talked to one of the students from Liberia, and she said she used to hide her African identity to avoid this –inaudible.

NM: That's true. For me I think this sort of thing you can never get rid of it, but it's coming down. Before it was very hard for me to wear African or uniform outside because they will laugh at you. Especially your own African American brothers, they said we are --, and so many names and things like that. And also, we are too dark in color. You know, so many things, you can't go outside and talk because when they hear us they say you motherfucking Africans, that's how they tell us. You come here and take our jobs and you guys are doing this here, doing that. Harass us,

you know, which is very, very bad. Even now, children go to school, they don't want to show their identity. They don't want to speak for them to know that these are Africans, they don't want play with them. And how many Africans are at the school? Not too much. Anywhere there is a lot of Africans, to get us a yellow card, Africans are coming, they harass them. You understand? And they are the majority so we can't really report them, nothing happen. And then I told you there are the cops, they do the same thing. Black Africans, African-Americans they be Carib or African Carib or something like that then they start harassing you about that, because those who are not educated or the ignorant ones do that. If they are educated, they know that Africans are human beings too. But like because that's why our children don't learn our languages and they speak only English, because they don't want to be speaking African language outside with their friends. Outside want to know that they Africans they will harass them, so that's how it is. As compared to Spanish people, the Spanish people speak their Spanish language outside anywhere, they are not ashamed they don't fear reprisal you know, but that's how it is. We the Africans have a problem, because the relationship between them, the African-Americans and us is not, it's not cool yet.

JE: What about your relationships like the other groups? Like the whites and the Spanish?

NM: The white people don't care, they don't care because the white have a problem with the African Americans. Even when they see you as African they admire you more and have sympathy more than Black Americans. Because they know where you come from, you understand and then you know we work hard and we want to improve our living conditions. The Spanish people too, they don't care you know, they are so nice. That's why you find in the Bronx, a lot of Africans here. Even at all in Queens and Brooklyn there are a lot of Black people there but the Black people are what do you call it, Jamaicans and that people, this refer to Africans and Americans you understand. So the Jamaicans –inaudible. But as we see the lightest

black country in the world is Nigeria. That's where Africans come from, but these people don't want it. They don't want to say that, we--. Like we find we do with the Spanish people better than Jamaicans or even Haitians who come from Africa too. You understand? Speak English and French but that's all Africans, people don't live with them but they live closer to them.

JE: To the Spanish?

NM: Yes.

JE: This is because they don't discriminate. And I realized so many Africans like to eat their African food, so can you talk about that? Like there are so many markets like for African foods and clothes or things like that.

NM: If you are African, does mean you live in Africa, you left Africa so you have forgotten the way you eat and the way you wear your clothing and something like that. But you come back, but whenever you go home you like to cook African food. African food is very spicy, nice and sometimes you can hear the scent of the dry fish and stalk fish and a lot of things. So it's nice but sometimes you know if you have an American, a Black American neighbor they will harass you, don't cook that stinking food and--.

JE: Especially the fish.

NM: The fish, but it's a nice food that you eat. You are eating and we sustain ourselves for quite a long time. But it's nice, one's five, one's seven, you can find some restaurants and some African dishes. And you can also find that food that you eat, and you go around there you find a stall where they sell African beer and African drinks. And the liquor, they sell African clothing, anything you want, you understand?

JE: So the beer is imported from--?

NM: From Ghana, I've seen one, more than different kinds of beer from Ghana, which is Tar beer, Club beer and I forgot what the name is because it just came on. That's Club beer yes. And

then you can drink your own country's beer too. If you want to drink palm wine and you can have palm wine, if you want to drink Apatacian.

JE: What is palm wine and Apatacian?

NM: Palm wine come from the palm tree, it's newly fermented. It's a raw material, it tastes good, sweet and nice. And when the brewery, they brew the sugar and then it turns to alcohol, Apatacian.

JE: What is the main food in Ghana or among Ghanaians?

NM: The main food of Ghanaians if called fufu. The fufu has made off, by plantain. Plantain and with a sour starch mixed together and that's fufu. Then you prepare your soup. Soup can be pamlan soup it can be vegetable soup, pamlan soup, and gardes.

JE: What is that?

NM: Gardes is a small vegetable that come from a special plant, it's nice to eat.

JE: The fufu--?

NM: If you want to make the soup with phase, that phase, top phase or cow meat or chicken or whatever. Yes, it tastes good. You'll have to come eat with me.

JE: When you celebrate this Independence here, because most of the Ghanaians they celebrate their independence every year, do you do it here in the Bronx also?

NM: Yes it's a special day here, in Ghana they just have fifty eight --. Also when Ghana – inaudible—everywhere in the Bronx you can find Ghana flag. And they were celebrating and the Spanish people were celebrating with us. You understand, so the culture has been preserved very well, whereby whatever happens in Ghana, in the world, whatever happens we'll do the same thing.

JE: Can you talk a little bit about the ancestral importance in people's lives?

NM: Yes, we don't forget our ancestors as I told you earlier. They are pretty important people in our lives, so we keep on remembering them. Because one day we will be part of them. And what you will do to honor their image or their existence, they are among us as Christians do honor their saints and Jesus Christ. Muslims do with the Imam and Jews do with the rabbis. Same thing we do. The culture is very nice and clear in that you will never forget your ancestors.

JE: What do you do for example, to preserve the relationship between the ancestors and yourselves?

NM: The Ashantis, the kings have all the names and somethings that are presented. Those important kings, like the saints. So during the time of their birthday or once a year they have a special celebration for them. And you got family, you can do it on your own, you understand? Maybe every April the family meet and you know have meetings and check and balance about what is going improvements and problems solved. Things in the family that your ancestor only your ancestor will be remembered. That's how you do it.

JE: The other thing is, you were mentioning that you have been to Germany. How long have you been there and why did you go there?

NM: I went there because I wanted to earn enough money to start business in Ghana. So I went there, that time, when was that? I think 1973-74 around there. That time we didn't like America because America, as we see America as the cowboys through your movies. We were taught that with Americans you can't go out, anywhere you go they will shoot you all and stuff like that. And I said oh heading towards that, Europe, all Africans just because you don't speak their language. But you go there you know, you survive and you take it from there.

JE: So you learned German?

NM: I learned German, I went to school there to learn how to, electrical welding and gas weld and I was working at a company there. Married a German woman and had a child.

JE: So she is there? He or she? Your child.

NM: No, he's in Florida with the mother.

JE: The mother migrated from Germany to Florida?

NM: Yes.

JE: Do you have contact or with your daughter or the mother?

NM: No I don't have contact with them. You leave and marry a new person they cancel everything. As a matter of fact I think I was in Germany in 1973 and left there in 1979.

JE: But what about, but here in America you can have a still relation with your child even if you are divorced or separated, do you have that kind of relation with your daughter?

NM: Before I had, as I said earlier, when I got married to a new lady, she cancelled everything.

Quite often I don't hear from them, even I went to Germany to look for them but there's no good results.

JE: There is something that I didn't ask in the first time. We have this gender relations. Like in Africa we have different way of how between your husband and your wife. And here it's a little bit different now. Can you explain?

NM: Yes, that's a nice question because here the woman, everything is half half. In America you have to practice American way of life. In Africa you know that we don't normally let woman work. Men go work hard, bring the money in to feed the family. But here a woman work and a man work. So therefore it's very hard to delegate all the responsibilities on the lady. So you have to have inputs in too.

JE: So do you cook?

NM: Yes, I love to cook but mostly my wife cook. Because my wife don't like my food. No, I know how to cook but it's only, she love to cook. We don't like eating outside, but she likes good restaurants and have good time. Because those cooks are professionals.

JE: What about your kids?

NM: They all cook and my kids too are married and one is, what do you call it single man school.

JE: In high school?

NM: And I have grandchildren too, I have about five grandchildren.

JE: You don't look like.

NM: Yes, but I would like to tell you one of the problems that the Africans facing in the Bronx here. That is, their healthcare barriers due to limited English skills. Lack of resources and absence of healthcare insurance, because that is one of the problems in the Bronx the Africans are facing. And also the healthcare providers who don't understand that individual Africans call there and cannot communicate with the patients. Because they don't understand when the Africans come, some of them don't speak English, they speak French, they speak different language. Communication is very tough, unless we only go the hospitals, there for you they will have a translator, who will be there too, but it's not always 100 percent. And also the barriers of language at education. And the housing projects and law, you understand? Because education if you don't speak the language how can you –inaudible—if you don't pass them how you can't go to college. And also to find a job, it's very hard to get a job because communication no good, no education, it's tough because Americans moving so fast, so if you can't fit in you have to join America. And by joining this is very important to have good education, as I told you earlier. And also the house across from us, they don't have no paper, it's very hard for them to get housing subsidies, and we help. So it's also from the barriers and some of them come here not all Africans are in 100 percent physical condition, some are mentally of, like mentally, depression, stress, you understand and all this kind of discrimination affects day to day to day living. So these are some of the problems and as I told you before with the Black Americans and Africans

the relationship between them, doesn't exist well. This is very important that at one time there will be unity but we have to work on it. We need to build a bridge between African Americans and Africans. African Americans, Africans, and Caribbean whatever, you understand. Because there is always a problem between us, you may not experience it but as a community, as I told you before that, the king of the Bronx, you have the same school, college here. I've seen it and it is real. If anything happen to African, like how many people goes there, how many African-Americans, they talk once about the car community. This is also no good, as I can tell you about the yellow--.

[End of Side A]

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