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Ceesay, Yandeh

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

[START OF TAPE ONE; SIDE ONE]

Dr. Jane Kani Edward (JE): My name is Dr. Jane Kani Edward. I am the director of African Immigration Research, in the department of African and African American Studies at Fordham University. Today is Tuesday, February 10th, 2009, and I am conducting an oral history interview with Yandeh Ceesay.

Yandeh Ceesay (YC): Yes.

JE: Yandeh Ceesay, whose family lives in the Bronx. The interview will last for about one hour, and is taking place in the seminar room number 633 Deal Hall, Fordham University. Please, Yandeh, if you can tell me your full name and spell it, so that we can have that for the transcription.

YC: Okay. Yandeh Ceesay. Y-A-N-D-E-H C-E-E-S-A-Y.

JE: So, I just want to know, before we go on with the interview, your background, and where are you from originally, how old were you when you came here [Indistinguishable].

YC: I'm from the Gambia. It's in West Africa. It's a tiny country. I am nineteen years old. I was born June—June 24th, 1989, and I came to the Bronx when I was about two. So that's back in 1991.

JE: Okay, so you came after—

YC: Yeah, my father came first, a year before me and my mother, and he sent for us after.

JE: So your father came in 1990.

YC: My father came in 1990, and I came in ’91.

JE: And what language do you speak?

YC: I speak Socé or Mandinka but my parents speak more languages. My mom speaks Wolof and something.

JE: And these languages are spoken in your country of origin? Back in the Gambia.

YC: Yeah, it’s the main country in the Gambia, as well as Wolof.

JE: And Wolof is also spoken in Senegal, right?

YC: Yes.

JE: Okay, how close to the Gambia is Senegal?

YC: The Gambia is actually surrounded by Senegal on three parts, and then the fourth part is where the ocean is.

JE: [Indistinguishable]

YC: Yes.

JE: And, please tell us about your growing up in the Bronx, and going to school everyday, and what you experiences.

YC: Actually, the first place that we lived was actually around here, on Fordham Road. And I went to school on Grand Concourse, St. Francis Day School, for pre-school. And when I first got there they held me back a grade, I guess to see—cause I still wasn't speaking English—to see how well I could adjust. And then the year after that, then they put me up to first grade, where I was supposed to be.

My dad would actually walk to pick me up, because it was so close to where we lived—

JE: So, is Grand Concourse and [Indistinguishable].

YC: Grand Concourse and around 192nd, so it wasn't far from where we lived at all. We lived on Tiebout, which is around 188th. So he would pick me up from school every day, and—by that

time, we still didn't have a car. Then I remember when he actually got a car, then he would drive me like the two blocks, cause I thought it was cool to do that.

And then, after there—I remember in my building, we had a lot of other Gambians, especially like on the same floor.

JE: So how big is the building? Like how many stories?

YC: It wasn't that big, maybe eight stories. One of those attached buildings. So we had a lot of other Gambians that lived there, and they became like my uncles and my aunts, because those were the people that we knew. So when my mom would go out to work, they would be watching me, because we all lived on the same floor and the same area. So, I also remember my mom used to sell like the jewelry—like the gold jewelry. She used to be a—what is it called—a—people that sell—

JE: The vendors.

YC: —the vendors on Fordham Road. So she did that a little bit, before she started up school again, when she came. So I remember that too.

JE: So she was vending on East Fordham Road?

YC: Yes.

JE: For how long?

YC: Not that long. Maybe like a couple of months.

JE: Okay.

YC:And then—she would do that while my dad went to work. Cause the Union Center Clinic used to be a hospital, so he used to work there—which was by the house also.

JE: So, when you came to the building that you lived in, you found some Gambians already living there, so your father decided to come and stay there?

YC: Yeah.

JE: And, if you could tell me a little bit about your parents. Like, when they came, what kind of job did they do?

YC: Well, my dad was a nurse in the Union Hospital, that turned into a clinic now. And my mom—like I said, she started doing the vending, and then after that, she started going to school in the [Indistinguishable].

JE: She studied?

YC: Accounting.

JE: And now they're doing their jobs in their fields?

YC: Yeah.

JE: Okay. And what about—how did you get to come to Fordham?

YC: After I went—I went to high school in Preston, in Throg's Neck. The Throg's Neck Center of the Bronx. It was a private all-girls school. And then—

JE: In the Bronx?

YC: Yeah. And then I was looking for schools, and I wanted something that would still be close to my family, cause I didn't want to move far away. So it was between, like, Fordham and St. John's. And, since I got accepted here, I decided to come.

JE: So how was the experience at the girls' private school.

YC: It was okay. I like the community, cause it was close-knit. There weren't a lot of other Africans there. There was mostly like Jamaicans and Spanish. But it was still nice there. I liked it. The school was very small, like 500 girls.

JE: Is it a boarding school or a day school?

YC: A day school.

JE: And do you have other brothers or sisters?

YC: Yeah, I have two brothers and one sister. One is—my oldest brother is 14, then my sister is 8, and the littlest one is 4.

JE: Oh, they're still young.

YC: (laughs) Yeah.

JE: And can you tell us about the experience at Fordham?

YC: It was a little bit difficult at first, because I decided to live on campus. So even though I was close to my family, I still had to deal with being away from home. So at first it was all about readjusting to the schoolwork, and planning my own time, because there's nobody there to tell me to wake up and go to class. So, once I got through all that, it was fine. Once you find, like, your friends. So—

JE: So, is it easy at Fordham to make friends? How did you get—like, who are your friends? People from the African community? Or any other—like, white students, or a bunch of ethnicities?

YC: I have friends—My main friends, I guess you could say, are both Jamaicans. Then I have, like, other friends that I don't hang out with all the time, but I met them through the African Diaspora Group. So, I also know them. And in—Yeah, some of my friends are African. A lot of my friends, actually, are not just African American. They actually come from, like, other black countries, I guess you could say.

JE: Like, the Caribbeans?

YC: Yeah, the Caribbeans, and some African countries also.

JE: And are you involved in other extracurricular activities at the university?

YC: Me? I was in the African Diaspora when it was opened last year, but it's no longer together. Then I did ASILI—the black student union on campus. Then I also did—last year they put on the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, so I also took a part in that. I was part of the committee. And then I'm also on the Step Team.

JE: Okay, and these groups, are they—who are they? Who participates in most of the activities—like, most of the students, are they from African countries, or they're from here?

YC: The black student union, ASILI, is mostly people that are from here—but then you don't realize it, because a lot of them are immigrants, but they just don't say it. So, when you get to know them, you see that they're from different black countries, or their parents are from black countries. And then the people that participated in the African Diaspora were obviously African. So, since that group doesn't exist anymore, they all go to the ASILI black student union.

JE: And what happened to the African Diaspora?

YC: I think it was just lack of members. People showing up and then they just stopped.

JE: And what about your relationship [Indistinguishable] in the Bronx? You said that they didn't let you [Indistinguishable] the Muslims from the Gambia. So what was the relationship between the people from the African countries and the other nationalities of [Indistinguishable], and the other groups that lived in the area?

YC: I don't remember being friends with a lot of people that weren't African. I remember having one friend, she was Black American, but that was about it. We mostly stayed with the Gambians, cause they would baby-sit us. Like, if they needed somebody to be babysat, my mom would baby-sit for them. So, we were really a close-knit community. And then when people would come from the Gambia, we would like help them get situated by letting them stay in the house. That was just kind of the culture, I guess.

JE: And what about—like here, in the U.S., like other things not the same as, you know, countries in Africa, because of— So how did your parents deal with their parenting issues in the context of the Bronx?

YC: Well, it started mostly when I got to high school. Elementary school—because when I went to elementary school, we moved, actually, to the Allerton section of the Bronx, which is kind of North, Northeast.

JE: Northeastern Bronx.

YC: Yeah, so me moved there, and I was like a walking distance away from school. But, when I would bring up these differences—because some of the girls in school, they were allowed to wear big earrings or put on nail polish. This is in elementary school. So basically, my mom would tell me, "We're not from here." So "This is not how we do it back home." And then that would be it. There was no discussion. But I'm glad it turned out that way.

JE: And what about religion? What kind of religion do you practice?

YC: We practice Islam. That's the majority—the dominant religion in the Gambia.

JE: And how did you feel after the September 11, 2001?

YC: I didn't feel like there would be any kind of bias, until other people started reacting to it that way. Because even within the Muslim community, there are different types of cultures and traditions. So usually—especially with African religions—we put our own traditions into the religion a lot. So I always felt that we were kind of different from the other practicing Muslims. So at first I didn't even see us as so much as connected, but you just have to deal with those things. We didn't really get a lot of backlash from it.

JE: Oh, okay. And in the area that—are you still living in the same area, or you moved from there? You said you moved from the building that you lived in to Allerton?

YC: Yeah, to the Northeast.

JE: So, are there mosques there that people go to pray every Friday?

YC: We actually used to go to this mosque in Mt. Vernon. So, it's like fifteen minutes away from the Bronx. So when I was still at home, every Friday my dad would take us there for the Friday prayers. So it wasn't that far. There was mostly like Arab Muslims there. And then, after a while—we used to go to Sunday school there too—so after a while, he transferred us to another Sunday school in the Bronx, around 174th. And there, it was mostly Gambian Muslims. So we felt more comfortable there.

JE: But the first one was not Gambian?

YC: No, it was mostly Arab.

JE: Arab—from the Middle East?

YC: Yeah.

JE: So why do you think you didn't feel as comfortable in the first one as the second one.

YC: Well, there is some culture differences. They're more strict about wearing the head cover. They're more strict about everything in general. Whereas I feel like the way we practice Islam is more laid back. We still have a lot of our cultures intertwined with it. And it's just easier to be around people that understand you more, and speak the same language as you.

JE: And the other thing that I would like to know obviously is—Because we interviewed so many African females who study here, and some who study somewhere else. And we asked about the [Indistinguishable] –marry somebody, and they have to marry someone, and they have to come from their home country, and they have to—How do your parents feel like?

YC: My parents always used to stress me marrying somebody from my same country. And at first I used to be resistant to it, but now that's something that I do want to do. Not because my parents said it, just because I feel like I would be more comfortable with somebody that understands everything about my background and stuff like that. It just makes it easier, and I connect more with people like that.

JE: And do you visit the Gambia, or [Indistinguishable]?

YC: Actually, I used to visit every three years. And now I visit every other year. So I'm supposed to be going back this summer.

JE: So do you go by yourself, or you'll go with your parents?

YC: I go with my brother. Well, now my mom, actually, in September she moved back. Cause she finished building the house and everything, so she moved back with the two smaller kids, the seven year old, and the four year old. So this summer I'm going to visit her, and then she'll come back for the remaining of the summer.

JE: And she decided to move back to stay there forever? Or she's coming back?

YC: She said she's gonna try it out, but she wants to live there. So she enrolled the kids in school and everything.

JE: And why do you think she wanted to stay there?

YC: Well, she always tells me that this is not my home, that she always wants to go back and be with her mother and things like that. So, I feel like that's what she wants to do.

JE: And what about your father? He's staying here?

YC: Yeah, my dad doesn't want to go back (laughs).

JE: So your dad is here. And when you go home you go to your dad?

YC: Yeah, I go to my dad's house, to like cook for him on the weekends and stuff, so he can have food.

JE: And the other thing is about community organizations besides the Mosque. Are there other community organizations for the Gambian community, either women's group or youth group?

YC: There's a Gambian society around 168th and Jerome. So that's what a lot of people partake in. I don't think my dad partakes in it that much. Maybe he'll give a donation now and then, but he doesn't go to the meetings. There's a weekly meeting every Sunday. I know people that go to it, but my dad is not—doesn't even have time for that. So he'll donate. They hold like parties, like on Christmas Eve, or New Year's, July 4th, or the Gambian Independence Day. So they'll do things like that, and then they also hold a mosque for the kids to go to. So, a lot of my little cousins go there for Sunday school and stuff like that.

JE: And I know that the Gambia is predominantly Muslims. Are there Christians also in the Gambia?

YC: There are, but not a lot.

JE: And how do they get along, Christians and Muslism?

YC: They get along fine. They just—when it's time to observe any of their things, we do it, and then vice versa. A lot of them are in Bon Jovo, so that's where they're focused. You don't really know who's Christian and who's not, because in the Gambia not everybody covers their head, so—And everybody, even if you're Christian, they still say "Salaam aleikum" when they walk in, because that just became part of our culture. It's not just a religion thing.

JE: And now, I know that they—the Qur'an is in Arabic. And, when you go to the Mosque or the Sunday school, do you read in Arabic, or another language?

YC: We read it in Arabic. I actually learned how to read it, but once you stop practicing you forget. So a lot of the kids that go every week, they know how to read Arabic. That's something that you just know. But I guess it's a little bit harder, because that's not our language. So we just read it to know how to read the Surahs, the little prayers. But the Arab Muslims, that's just their language, so it's just—

JE: So, you—yes—read it, but you don't understand what it is—

YC: Some of them understand it, but it's mostly about memorization, how many of them that you can memorize.

JE: And what about this—let's go back to the Gambia now, the community that we talked about. What do they do?

YC: The organization?

JE: The organization. Do they do celebrations, do they—you know? What do they do, exactly?

YC: They try to raise money for youth events, mostly through the parties and stuff. And then the only other thing they're doing—that I'm aware of—is the mosque. Maybe somebody that's more involved—

JE: Okay, and because there are other groups in the African community that are so linked, they have activities, they [indistinguishable] together, countries that—like the Nigerians, for example, there is tons of community exchange. [indistinguishable] I don't know if the Gambian community does the same kind of activities?

YC: Not as much. The most, I guess, interconnected they get is when they organize the July 4th trip down to Atlanta. Because that's where everybody comes and meets up again. It's like a big reunion every year.

JE: So why do they have to go to Atlanta?

YC: That just became the site for it. There's a lot more Gambians down in Maryland and Atlanta than up here, for some reason. That just became the site for it. So every year, July 4th—

JE: Everybody goes there.

YC: —no matter what state you're in. Everybody goes down there. It's like a big reunion.

JE: That's Atlanta, Georgia—right?

YC: Yeah.

JE: Okay. So when people go there, what would they be doing?

YC: They have—yeah, they have a lot of different programs. I think over like three days they have barbeques, they have games, they have parties at night. And then they have a thing called the Park, where they just open up the stadium, everybody goes there. They're like selling food—the vendors—they have music and everything, so it's really fun. Then they have a soccer game—football game.

JE: And you participate in this—every year, you go there?

YC: Well, I've only been down there twice. My mom doesn't really like me (laughs) going down there too much, but I've been down twice. It was fun.

JE: Oh, that's good. And the other thing is that: you said that your mom built a house in the Gambia. How did that happen?

YC: I feel like it was probably going on before I even realized it, because I was young. So they were probably sending money every month to help build a house, and then it was finally finished. I think—

JE: So you have other family members there who can build it?

YC: No, I think they hired—yeah. But I do have a lot of family members still back there. But they just supervised it, to make sure everything was going smoothly.

JE: And your grandparents are still there?

YC: Yeah, my grandmother actually passed away about three months ago. But she was really old. She was like 108. So she lived a really long life. So my dad's parents—

JE: That's from your mother's side?

YC: No, my dad's side. So his parents are gone. My grandfather on his side passed away before I was even born. But my mother's parents are still there. That's where we used to go—the house that we used to go into before the house was finished, when I used to visit.

JE: And your house there in the Gambia, is it in the capital city, or on the outskirts?

YC: No, it's actually—I guess you could say the suburbs.

JE: The suburbs?

YC: Yeah, it's actually an area that a lot of people are building houses in, so it's a developing area. So a lot of people that, I guess, are overseas are building houses in this area. I think it's called Busamine (SP?).

JE: So you mean there are so many Gambians who live in the US, but still they go and build houses in the Gambia?

YC: Yeah.

JE: With the intention of going back? Or just to help with that?

YC: With the intention of going back.

JE: And then the other thing, through other interviews, we're finding that the issue of burial. When somebody dies outside the country, what happens, usually? Especially among the Muslims. And I know that the Muslims, they don't take their dead for a long time; they have a

process. And in our countries we have Muslims and Christians [indistinguishable]. What happens when somebody dies here in the U.S.?

YC: I'm not exactly sure, but I think that they actually send the body back to be buried in the village that they came from. Because not everybody that lives around the capital—they still say that they're from whatever village they were, like the upcountry, as we like to call it. So they actually send the body back there to be buried.

JE: Do you have any [indistinguishable]?

YC: Yeah, I think that's what it's like. I remember hearing something about that, but I would have to double check to be sure.

JE: And I think that's all I can ask. Unless you want to add more information about you?

YC: I think that's it. I feel like my father would be more—better.

JE: Okay, thank you Yandeh for coming for the interview

YC: You're welcome.

JE: This is really very good information, and—let me stop this for a second.

[END OF INTERVIEW]