

6-14-2007

Kef-Karma, Sheku

Kef-Karma, Sheku Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Interviewee: Kef-Karma, Sheku (Chosan)
Interviewers: Jane Edwards and Mark Naison

June 14, 2007

Transcriber: Ariana Allensworth

Jane Edwards (JE): My Name is Doctor Jane Edwards, I am a senior interviewer and researcher on African immigrants in the Bronx area, for the Bronx African American History Project. Today is Thursday June 14th, 2007 and we're conducting an oral interview with Chosan. The interview will last for about 90 minutes to two hours. The interview is taking place in room 633, Department of African and African American Studies, Dealy Hall Fordham University's Rose Hill Campus. Okay, before we start asking your life I'd like you to introduce your name and you will have to spell it as it will help us with the transcription.

Chosan (C): My name is Chosan. That's spelled C-H-O-S-A-N a.k.a [Indiscernible Name].

JE: Would you tell me about your family background, where you come from?

C: I was born in a country called Sierra Leon, in West Africa. I was born into a relatively small family and basically all of my family has just been me and my mom. My mom then moved to London –

Mark Naison (MN): How old were you she moved to London?

C: I was about two. So in terms of family, I come from a really small family, I come from a really poor background, my mother really studied her way out of Sierra Leon. She's the only member of my family to leave Africa, everyone else is still there, she's the only one that left. So she came out through studying.

MN: What level of education did she have when she was in Sierra Leon?

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C: I think she got to a degree level. She did a nursing kind of school, went into nursing and then through that scheme got to London.

JE: Can you tell us about your experience in London? How long have you been there?

C: I grew up in London, it's funny because everyone, out here anyway, has the opinion that London is kind of this, kind of, upper class place with the queen, everybody's drinking tea –

MN: (Laughter) Upstairs and downstairs, yes.

C: Yes. It's funny that the more people that ask me, the more I realize people's perceptions, and that's really not the case. London is really a lot like New York, I would say. In terms of different areas, we have really poor places over there, over here they have housing schemes, the projects, we have things called estates, which are the same things, you know they have like a welfare thing over there, it's called housing benefits. Almost everything you can think of that we do have here. I grew up – London is a place where, you know, for ethnic minorities, it's really small, over here it's small, but over there it's *really* small. It's like I don't know, five percent of the nation. I grew up with a sense you can do things, but you kind of fall into patterns over there, you notice everyone over there is, more or less, doing the same things they did like four or five years ago and not everybody feels there's an opportunity to excel and to do other things over there in London. That's – I don't know if it's weather, people say, because the weather's grey and gloomy, I think that has a big effect on people.

MN: In your neighborhood, what were the different groups that were living there? Was it mostly African, or was it very mixed?

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C: I would say specifically where I lived, wasn't African. We had African people in there, but it was more West Indian, it was more Turkish, it was more Indian. I think the difference between here and London as well is that in London I think that the races are mixed more. Like, it's not just one place and it's just full of African-Americans or its full of Jewish people. Over there, maybe because it's so small, everybody kind of has to mix a lot more.

JE: You started school there? Since you went there at two years old? So how far did you go in school?

C: I actually went to – I actually got into school, up to a degree level, I went to college and actually – what's the word they call it over here? Flunk out? Or whatever. That was my choice because where I was, because I wasn't in London, this is when my music stuff was really kicking off, and it was out of London, and maybe the equivalent to that is like being in Connecticut. I only went to that place because my grade average was okay, it wasn't great, that was only place I could go. But what that'd done was it took me out of the busy environment of London, which I'm used to, and put into, you know, really out there, in a much slower place, where I didn't know anybody, and I just couldn't connect being there. Every time I was there, I was thinking about, you know, being over here, I've always been somebody whose kind of had that drive, trying to make something happen.

MN: Was hip-hop culture part of your neighborhood in London? You know, not just the music, the graffiti, the break dancing, that whole mix?

C: I think that the actual hip-hop culture wasn't part of my neighborhood; it was a part of scenes. It's not like it is here, where it's certain areas, like the Bronx was known for

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graffiti, it was known for – it's kind of not like that over there, people pick up things and kind of make subcultures, and do it themselves. My area really wasn't known for that, it was on the border, it was kind of a violent kind of street culture, it was more reggae oriented, than it was hip-hop oriented.

MN: So, your email address is silverstreets@gmail, so your immediate neighborhood was silver streets?

C: Yes.

MN: And it was known more for reggae?

C: I think the whole North London – London as a whole, again it wasn't like how it is here, where generations grow up into hip-hop. It came over there – due to immigrants coming in, because there's a heavy Jamaican influence, people grew up more with generations of reggae, like having sound systems and stuff like that, I think that's where more –

MN: What about African culture, was that part of your childhood life?

C: Definitely, my mom, definitely I grew up never for one second forgot that I was African. I was happy I was given an African name, because that kind of made me understand from an early age – sometimes I think there's a disbalance, like when I first moved I remember going to a school and I used to be really – I used to kind of get worried when the register was being called and they would pronounce the names, I don't know, John, Mark, and when they got to my name, I always knew when they got to my name, because it always used to be Shhhika. And people would start laughing and I think I was a big thing from growing up, having to understand the responsibility, you know, I wasn't from here, I came from somewhere else, people would always tell me that. The

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fact that my name, that fact that my culture was different. You know if I was with my mom or some of her friends, they would wear African attire on the street where people would wear jeans, so I always had that, okay, I can be wherever I am, but this is my culture, this is where I'm from.

JE: And do you organize or attend like community events that celebrate African culture?

C: In London? I don't think it was that big because it wasn't as it is here. I think it might have – it's actually changed now, because they have a Miss Ghana, or Nigerian independence, or Sierra Leon independence, as people got more, people started to get together more. The events I went to and stuff were like weddings, someone has a wedding they invite everyone, I had a lot of friends, and that's how I kind of got my community.

JE: Can you tell us why your mother migrated from Sierra Leon to London?

C: She migrated because she wanted a better life for herself, and me and my family, at the time. And she just was that person she was prepared to go to have a better life for herself, and me ,and also the family back in Sierra Leon.

MN: Did she send money back to her relatives?

C: That was a part of growing up. I realized that the responsibilities, apart from myself, that, you know, my mother had. She would work like two jobs, and we would be in the house, and then she was also, my father, she was kind of supporting him through college, also my mother would send money back, or send things back. We'd get a big carton of boxes, fill them up with supplies and send them over, so I was introduced to that at a very young age.

MN: Did you have family members visit you from Sierra Leon when you were young?

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C: No, no one has ever left.

MN: Because it's very hard to get out?

C: I think it's very hard to get out, and I think that they're from a generation that just didn't leave, they're from a really old school background, and to them that's probably a ridiculous idea.

MN: What religious tradition were you brought up in, if any?

C: We were brought up, I want to say a Christian background. Although my father was a Muslim, but my mom was more of a heavy influence, so that kind of changed things.

JE: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

C: No.

JE: The only one. So why did you decide to move from London to the United States?

C: Mainly because I think how life is. Because I decided to leave London for the same reasons my mom would have left Sierra Leon. I was dissatisfied with what I felt the representation of hip-hop music in London. Where I was from it's not really taken that seriously, nobody's like a big star, no one is making big money, it's not a lifestyle, it's kind of like a really small subcultures. Here it's more mainstream, here it's more pop, it's more exports in the US. There are couple that have surfaced out, but they're not that big. So for me, I was always a person that just had a thousand ideas, I would go in, go out on street teams, go do shows, go sell CDs, get people together and do stuff. There was a big concert over there, and this American group came over, and we were on the same bill, and I worked really hard, I got a bunch of people together, there were like 15 of us, we felt very organized, did our huge show. Then the American act came on, and, you know, they were okay, but you could tell they wasn't really there – they were there for the

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money etcetera, so after that when we spoke to the promoter, he said, well you guys did a good job but, you know, we can't pay you. But he's going to pay them like 1000 of pounds to do what they done, and they didn't put their heart into it, and not pay the people that are here. That kind of really happened a lot at the time, so I was like –I really believe in myself, I have a high faith level, and I really wanted to make a big impact like someone like Slick Rick was able to leave London and come to America and become an icon.

MN: So Slick Rick was the model of someone from England, who became successful here?

C: I would say, yes. And still now a lot of people hold that. Another question was why the Bronx. That was a funny situation, because the Bronx was where I had my girlfriend at the time, she came from England as well, and when I first came here I was living in Jersey and I was in Jersey for a year.

MN: Where in New Jersey?

C: I came through a work-study program?

JE: When was that?

C: That was 2000.

MN: How old are you by the way?

C: I'm 28. So, I came through a work-study program, I was in Jersey, and she's got a place in the Bronx. So that's why I kind of ended up in the Bronx.

MN: Where was the first apartment?

C: The funny thing is, I don't know if this is life, I don't know if this is this is the most craziest thing. But the first apartment is the first apartment I'm staying in now. Which is

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very crazy. I don't know how, from there I've lived in Harlem, I've lived in Washington Heights, I've lived in Brooklyn.

MN: Where is your apartment now, what street?

C: It's in Baychester.

MN: What exact street?

C: Tiemann Avenue. It's kind of funny to me how it all comes full circle.

JE: Can you tell us about your experience in the Bronx?

C: I think, for me, the Bronx was – it's funny, because now that I'm back there, I've realized that the place I was, it was my first experience of New York, and it was kind of like a homey feel, now I'm back there I feel really easy, I don't know if it's because I've been so many other places, and so many different environments –

JE: Within the U.S.?

C: Yes, within New York.

JE: -- Within New York.

C: So many different experiences, and I really been to some really *hard* places, some really aggressive, really tough, kind of places. It's funny because the Bronx kind of have a sweet – because my big accident was in the Bronx, where I was hospitalized for a long while, and that's when I had my big kind of break up in the Bronx.

JE: Can you tell us?

C: Well I was walking from Seaman Avenue across the street, and I was hit by a kind of SUV truck from behind, as I was walking across the street, and that's why it's funny that the whole thing with the Bronx and me is kind of like a rebirth. It's something I will never ever forget, and even now living there crossing the road, I can always look at that

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point and say that was the point when I was hit by an SUV. I was left on the floor, and I was there and not knowing how I was injured, whether I was going to live, whether I was going to die, and I remember being at a point saying please don't leave me, I didn't come all this way to be left on the floor.

MN: And was this a hit and run?

C: Yes. It was, but they got found.

MN: And you also said there was a break up after this?

C: Yes, this was the whole period I started writing my music, and so it's interesting that it's full circle. But after that, after being with somebody, it was a real dark period, because I'd just had the accident, I had to do to therapy for a year, I was the only guy who I saw in the Bronx with like a walking stick, with crutches. For some reason I don't see people walking with crutches. After the accident, a month before my father also passed away in Sierra Leon, as well. So it was a real dark period at that point and then after that, I guess, I went into a state of, I don't want to say depression, but a really dark kind of mentality and way of thinking. So that's what I think of that period in time.

MN: Now musically, did you have contacts when you came to New York, of people who you wanted to talk to?

C: I had one – I had two numbers, one was this DJ that's I had met in England and he was like yes, yes, yes, come to New York. When I came to New York, he was completely on some egotistical type things, so that was scratched out. The other guy I met, also in London, same thing when I got here. So I started, more or less, from scratch.

MN: What I'd like to do now is, let's eat.

[END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A]