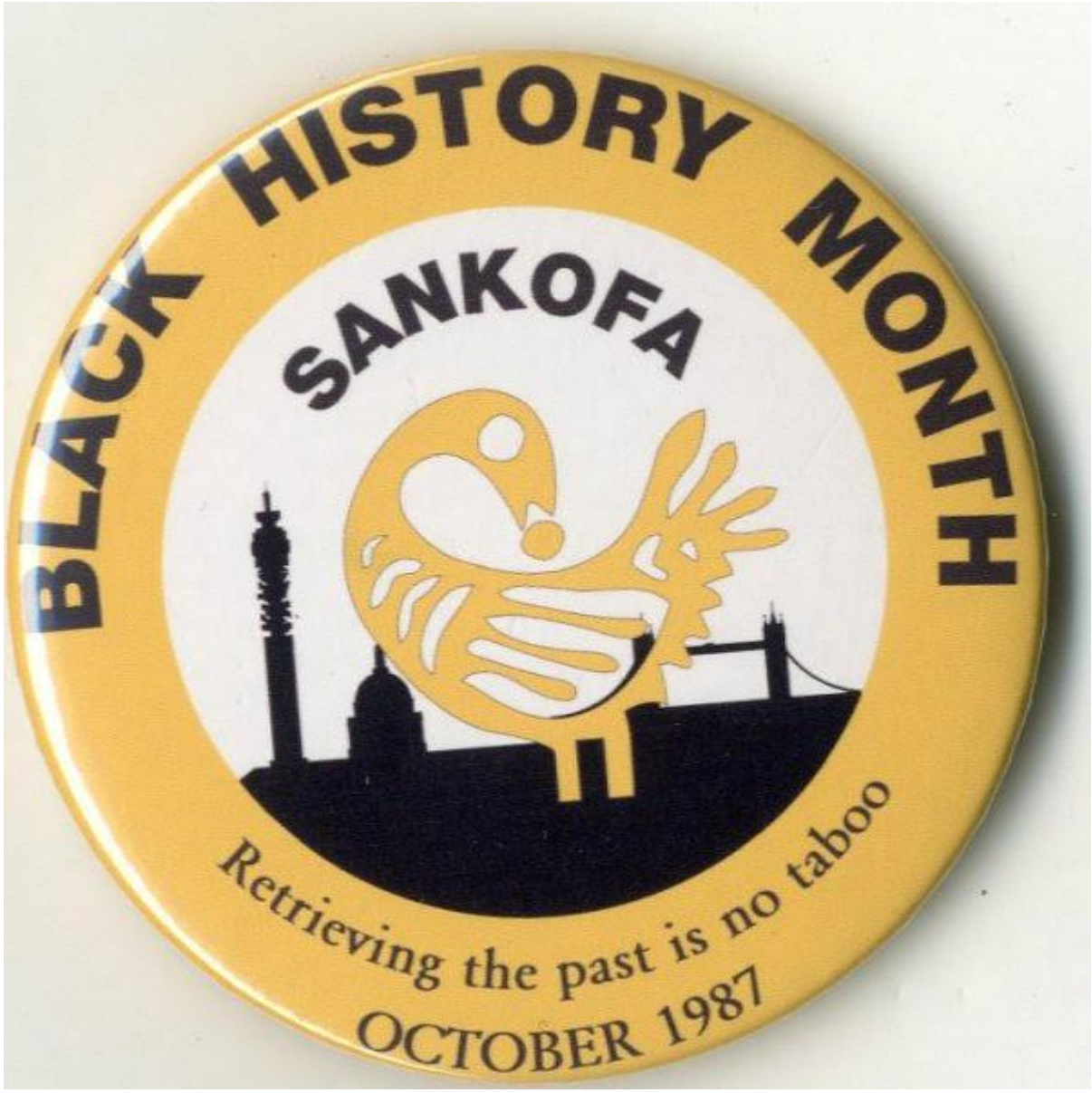
Black History Month UK (1987 – 2017)



Introduction

In 2017, we will observe the 30th year of the observance of Black History Month in the UK.

Black History Month is an annual observance in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom for remembrance of important people and events in the history of the African diaspora. It is celebrated annually in the Caribbean, United States and Canada in February and here in the United Kingdom in October.

In 1926, the first Negro History Week was presented by Carter G. Woodson, historian, author, journalist and the founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life

and History. A founder of the Journal of Negro History in 1916, Woodson has been cited as the Father of Black History. In February of 1926, he announced the celebration of "Negro History Week", considered the precursor of Black History Month.

By the time America celebrated its bicentenary in 1976 the week had become a month-long initiative and rebranded Black History Month.

The observation of the month of October as Black History Month in the UK had its gestation in an anti-racist momentum initiated by the programmes and priorities of the Ethnic Minorities Unit (EMU) of the Greater London Council (GLC), led by the Principal Race Relations Adviser and Head of the Unit, Ansel Wong.

When the GLC & EMU was abolished, the political determination to keep this momentum live was driven by the leaders of the successor bodies - The Chair of the London Strategic Policy Unit (LSPU), Cllr Linda Bellos and the Chair of the Race Equality Policy Group (REPG), Cllr Narendra Makanji.

Post abolition of the GLC and with the unqualified support of Linda Bellos and Narendra Makanji plus the Deputy Leader of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), Bernard Wiltshire, staff in REPG and other units of the LSPU continued working on this idea, led by Akyaaba Addai-Sebo who was a Policy Team Leader in the Unit. Much of the success of this initiative was due to his vision and efforts.

The Imperatives for BHM UK

In an interview published in New African with Akyaaba Addai-Sebo, he outlined some of the push factors that influenced our thinking in creating and implementing the designation in the UK of October as Black History Month.

“The inspiration for Black History Month came from an incident that happened at the GLC where I worked as the Co-ordinator of Special Projects. A colleague of mine, a woman, came to work one morning, looking very downcast and not herself. I asked her what the matter was and she confided to me that the previous night when she was putting her son Marcus to bed he asked her, "Mum, why can't I be white?"

The mother was taken aback. She said that she was so shocked that she didn't know how to respond to her son. The boy that had been named after Marcus Garvey had asked why he couldn't be white!

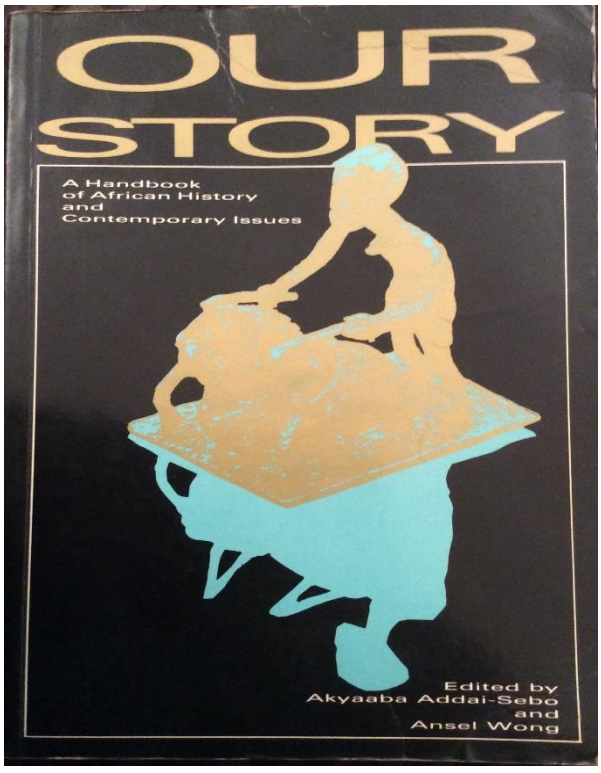
In the US, I would lecture about Africa and its contribution to world civilisation. I would talk to many schoolchildren and their parents about the African genius, the appropriateness and validity of our traditions, moral code, hospitality and I would demonstrate how we lived in Africa, the games we played as children and the food we ate. Session after session, some children and their parents would come to me attesting their new found faith in themselves as Africans, and the change that the encounter had brought to their homes.

So when this incident with Marcus took place in London, it dawned on me that something had to happen here in Britain. I was very familiar with black history month in America, and thought that something like that had to be done here in the UK, because if this was the fountainhead of colonialism, imperialism and racism, and despite all the institutions of higher learning and research and also the cluster of African embassies, you could still find a six year old boy being confused about his identity even though his mother had tried to correct it at birth, that meant the mother had not succeeded because the wider society had failed her.

That also meant that the world out there and the happenings in it, particularly in the playgrounds and classrooms of the various schools in the UK were so strong and powerful that they denigrated that person's identity, which made that child question his identity as an African or being black. That was something that really touched me and so I reflected on it for many weeks. The only thing that came to me after those weeks of reflection was that something had to be done here in the UK to permanently celebrate Africa's contribution to world civilisation".[1]

The upshot of this incident was a series of discussions within the staff and supporters of the GLC's Ethnic Minorities Unit resulting in a decision to "take action" and incorporate an annual celebration of Black History into our programme of activities.

Our Programme of activities included the celebration of African Jubilee Year from August 1987 to July 1988 with October designated as ***Black History Month.***



But before then, I managed to identify sufficient resources, in part through creative accounting, to organise a series of lectures, that in hindsight, were the precursors to the designation of October as Black History Month in 1987. At the Greater London Council, the local government for London, we were at the forefront of the campaigns against institutional racism in the UK and the apartheid regimes in Southern Africa. This vantage point in the administration of the city of London enabled us to invite into our community personalities like Sally Mugabe, Graca Machel, Winnie Mandela, Nina Simone, Angela Davis, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Max Roach, Hugh Masakela, John Henrik Clarke, Frances Cress-Welsing, Tony Martin, Yosef ben-Jochannan, Mawulena Karenga, Grand Ballets d'Afrique Noire, Ray Charles, Burning Spear and many more to inspire,

[1] Interview with Akyaaba Addai-Sebo, New African, October 2014.

educate and help in the in the intellectual preparation of our community for the future safety and development of Africa in our collective interest.

These lectures provided the impetus, political and institutional, for the platform for more daring initiatives and were also held in Birmingham, Manchester and other cities across the UK. They were compiled and published as **Our Story**[2], edited by Akyaaba Addai-Sebo and Ansel Wong. It is presently out of print.

In many ways, this publication epitomised the collaborative drive that underpinned this celebration. As local government staff, we were keen to broker genuine community involvement and engagement drawing on the contributions of activists and professional expertise among the African and Caribbean Diaspora.

The book was designed by Robert Lee, Kofi Hagan and Anum A Iyapo; photographic research by Armet Francis; manuscript preparation by RT Studios and printed by Hansib Publishing, the nation's leading Black Publishing House.

We also organised some cultural events and brought in international renowned musicians from the UK, the Caribbean, the USA, Africa, Ireland and India to perform at the Wembley Arena and the Royal Albert Hall.

The celebratory Concert to launch the first Black History Month included such luminaries as Hugh Masakela, Max Roach, Ghanaba, Earls-in-Flight, Alap, Tania Maria, Courtney Pyne, Grandes Ballets d'Afrique Noir of Guinea, Henrik Clarke, Tony Martin, Josef ben-Jochannan and Frances Cress Welsing, among others.

We filled the Royal Albert Hall with schoolchildren from all over Greater London for a week, where they listened to inspirational music and talks.

The successes of these events, prompted us to agree that this approach had to be institutionalised, and so the idea of Black History Month was born.

We drafted and issued an **African Jubilee Year Declaration** that:
• Recognised the contributions of Africans to the cultural, economic and political life of London and the UK.
• Called upon the London boroughs to recognise this fact and take their duties as enjoined by the Race Relations Act very seriously, to intensify their support against apartheid, and to continue the process of naming monuments, parks and buildings after illustrious African leaders, and to do everything in their power to ensure that black children did not lose the fact of the genius of their African-ness.

African Jubilee Year was a celebration of
- the Centenary of Marcus Garvey's Birth
- the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)
- the 150th anniversary of emancipation in the Caribbean.

[2] Our Story: A Handbook of African History and Contemporary Issues, ed. Akyaaba Addai-Sebo & Ansel Wong, London Strategic Policy Unit, 1988

And to be publicly honest and truthful, now that I have left the employ of the GLC, it was also a defiant gesture against Thatcher's abolition of the GLC. We were not going down with a whimper. We would use the death throes of the GLC and the little money left to make a statement of the black presence in this country and the validity of our multiple heritages.

The declaration we issued was bold and challenging for its time. We broadened our base by engaging with other local authority officers such as Vitas Evans of the Association of London Authorities (ALA). And most importantly, we were able to get everybody to agree to the radical proposals contained in this Declaration, safe in the knowledge that our backs, as officers, were covered by our political leaders, Linda Bellos, Bernard Wiltshire and Narendra Makanji.

These local politicians committed the ILEA, the ALA and the seven local authorities that made up the London Strategic Policy Unit (LSPU), the successor body to the abolished GLC, to observe the month of October as Black History Month from 1987.

And so, the 1st of October 1987 was the first Black History Month in this country.

The inaugural address to launch the event was given by Dr Maulana Ron Karenga who spoke at County Hall on "The Meaning & Challenge of African History" with a contextual introductory contribution from the Deputy Leader of the ILEA, Bernard Wiltshire.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, the originator of Kwanzaa in the US, was chosen specifically because of his relevance to what we were doing and because he had launched Kwanzaa which had become a successful part of the cultural calendar both in the US and the UK. He, together with the late Mrs Sally Mugabe, the London Strategic Policy Unit, the Inner London Education Authority and various politicians all worked together to launch the first events of Black History Month.

This was followed by a series of lectures at the community centres of the various London boroughs. Later, the events spread to other parts of the UK because the African Jubilee Year Declaration that was launched here in July/August 1987 was also sent across the country but it took some time for the other boroughs outside London to adopt the declaration, which formally instituted the month of October as Black History Month throughout the UK.

Some have questioned our use of the term "Black" instead of "African". We deliberately chose to call it "Black" as Black posited and reflected tolerance and acceptance of the enriching cultural diversity of contemporary British society. Black is also a unifier term that brings into sharp relief the various strands of suffering, humiliation, exploitation and denigration as well as an articulation of solidarity and the building of allies in relation to shared and common experiences.

We also stressed that "Africa" was not excluded. In fact, it was the essence as was evidenced in the accompanying 1986-87 Historical Concerts and Lectures celebrating Africa's contribution to world civilisation at the Royal Albert Hall and various community centres.

It is also important to know why October?

The month of October resonates with so many cultural and political references and we were in total agreement that October is the most appropriate month for this celebration and observance.

In the UK, it is the beginning of the first term of the academic year after the long vacation and thus a period where the attention and imagination of children and youth people could be captured as they are not burdened with school work. And, interestingly, the weather during this period is often mild.

Apart from the significance of October within the African calendar - the period of the autumn equinox in Africa - October is also consecrated as the harvest period, the period of plenty, and the period of the Yam Festivals. It was the time in history when Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia for example were the cradle and breadbasket of civilisation.

October is also a period of tolerance and reconciliation in Africa, when the chiefs and leaders would gather to settle all differences. This was also the time to examine one's life in relation to the collective and to see if the targets set for oneself and the group during the past year had been achieved or not.

Africa gave the world the calendar. Our ancestors built the Pyramids, knowing about mathematics, architecture and astronomy. October was therefore chosen because of these factors. Black History Month is a reconnection with our cultural and political sources.

In the USA, Carter G. Woodson chose February as the US Black History Month because Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas were born in that month.

We chose to be different and chose October for the reasons outlined above.

We also chose not to be too compliant in our uncritical adherence of all things American; staking a claim for the specific British context of our struggles and existence.

Our original goal was to first create an enabling cultural space in the UK celebratory calendar and after public acceptance and recognition extend the month from October to January to encompass Kwanza and call the period Black History Season with the symbioses with the Woodson and Karenga creation in the US remaining.

It is my hope that this vision will be reintroduced as others take on the baton that we are passing on.

Designating Black History Month as a month of commemoration and celebration was a collective effort and it could not have been achieved without the London Strategic Policy Unit, an organisation established after the Thatcher government abolished the GLC in 1986.

There were many people involved, and it is difficult to mention everyone, but Akyaaba Addai-Sebo was both the inspiration and irritant that kept me on my toes; that kept pushing the boundaries, encouraging others and infusing us with the vision of success when doubts surfaced. Other contributors who made all of this possible were Linda Bellos, Ken Livingstone, Paul Boateng, Margaret Hodge, Anne Matthews, Narendra Makenji, Peter Brayshaw, Drew Stevenson, Bernard Wiltshire, Herman Ouseley, Ken Martindale, Vitus Evans, Chris Boothman, Lord Gifford, Bernie Grant, Shirley Andrews and Edward Oteng. And that is just naming a few!

And to my Secretary, Elizabeth, whose son Marcus started the first stage of this whole journey.

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