

AFRICAN DIASPORANS IN SWEDEN

An Unfinished History

© 2005 by Madubuko A. Diakité¹

Lund, Sweden

Introduction

Africans and African Diasporans have been living in Sweden since the 1300s. This briefing on that presence is the result of many personal interviews and oral histories I have listened to with people living here since my arrival in 1968. The entire history will probably never be completed or even told, hence my suggested title above. A more detailed history will one day be written. Until then, I am happy to hand these bits and pieces over to the next generation of amateur historians who can develop them in more detail.

For these bits I would like to offer a very warm and sincere thanks to: Karl Andreasson, Ronald B. Antoine, Charles Campbell (Denmark), Ylva Eggehorn, Don-Franklin Desesaure, McKinley Ruffin and Lena Sawyer . It is dedicated to the memories of Vernon Boggs, Herbert Gentry and Paula Watson.

M. A. Diakité

“BLUE MEN” IN SWEDEN

Despite its distance from the triangle of the Atlantic slave trade neither Africans nor African Diasporans are strangers to Swedish shores.² The nation’s early history of global trading and its only Caribbean colony, St. Bartholomew, contributed huge economic profits to Swedish ship builders, sail makers, exporters of salted beef, iron chains and other hardware that was used by slave-trading nations. The spin-off from the Atlantic slave trade included a continuous, though small, trickle of Africans and diasporans who were in service to, or at the disposal of, wealthy Swedes.³ Some were used as house servants in the homes of noblemen and aristocrats, but there are also written accounts of “blue men” serving in Swedish armies, of black women in convents and of black servants in royal palaces.⁴ It fact, even though Sweden was officially slave-free, having a black servant-boy or girl around the house was considered a challenge: it was one of the many symbols of one’s ability to “tame the savage”. Hence, written accounts of blacks in Sweden since the 1300s can be found in Swedish family and museum archives, church records and on road-show flyers.⁵ Many of the descriptions of Africans and African Diasporans at that time compared them with monsters, devils or as someone from an uncivilized world.

From “Savage” to Lackey

Sweden’s most famous African Diasporan of them all was a man known as Adolf Badin (also known as Couschi) who was born a slave in the Danish colony Saint Croix in 1747. Bought for \$10 and taken to Europe by a Danish sea captain, he was eventually presented to Sweden’s Queen Lovisa Ulrika as a gift ca. 1757. The Queen had read Jean-Jaques Rousseau’s book on education, *Émil*, wanted to experiment with an upbringing free of society’s inhibitions, and then convert the person to become “civilized.” For years Badin was allowed to roam free around the palace as “natural” as he could be, a privilege that included free access to a playmate his age who would one day be King Gustav III. Eventually the Queen decided it was time to “Europeanise” him.⁶ He was tutored in the languages of the Court (French, German and Latin) by Sweden’s pioneers in education, converted to Christianity and given the name Adolf Ludvig Gustav Fredrik Albert Badin. The success with Badin was proof to the Court and social engineers at the time that even the most noble savage could be educated. His ability to learn became a cornerstone in arguments for proving that an education could be also be achieved by the common man, an argument that led to the education for all, not just nobility and Royals. But the handful of Swedish historians and

novelists who have written anything about Badin overlook this role he had at the Court, and prefer to identify him by the common name given many African Diasporans in Europe at the time: “Morianen”.⁷

Adolf Badin would rise from being the Holstein-Gottorp’s Court “*lakej*” to become a titled person in the Courts of King Adolf Fredrik and his Queen Lovisa Ulrika (1751-17), and of their oldest son, who was also his boyhood friend, King Gustav III. He became a member of the Courts Honors Society and was given the title Assessor. Other tasks he performed included accompanying the Queen on diplomatic missions, the Court’s chess player, roving ambassador, weather forecaster and, at its most vulnerable period, its protector. On orders from the Queen on her death-bed, he destroyed sensitive notes she had kept regarding her oldest son Gustav III.⁸ Instead of losing his head for this, the King pardoned him with tears in his eyes because of their boyhood upbringing. Badin was the only person who could address the King in the first person (i.e., “you”).⁹

Adolf Badin eventually became the caretaker for three royal palaces, had a library of 800 books, and was married twice to aristocratic ladies but left no living children. Popular with the Court ladies, it was rumored that he even had a child by King Gustav III’s sister, Princess Sophia Albertina, but this does not appear in any official records or in his autobiography.¹⁰ Badin survived during one of the most turbulent eras of Swedish Court intrigue. Upon the death of his patron, the Queen, in 1782, he was handed over to King Gustav III, who was eventually murdered in his own castle in 1792. He also had a presence during the regimes of the next two Swedish monarchs, Gustav IV Adolf (1792/1796 -- 1809) and Karl XIII (1809 – 1818), though his role in their Courts is unclear. When he died in 1822 he was about 75 years old.

The Deliberate Neglect of A Role Model

Although well respected within the Swedish court at the time, Adolf Badin’s talents and contributions to the Courts he served are almost never mentioned in the history books used in Swedish schools. Besides four fictional biographies about him, there has been one issue of a Swedish stamp commemorating him, and his character has had minor roles in a number of Swedish films and plays, most of which are focused on the murder of Gustav III”.¹¹ The most accessible physical evidence of his existence in Sweden are paintings of him in museums around Sweden, including The National Museum in Stockholm. The most widely known of these is a 1775 pastel drawing of him playing Chess in a Free Mason uniform adorned with ostrich feathers by Gustav Lundberg, located in Gripsholms Castle, one of those under his charge. The pointed index finger on his left hand in the painting has had several explanations, none of which are agreed upon by the authors of books on him. Is it an obscene gesture, one of defiance such as the clenched fist of the 1960s, or one that aims simply to provoke the viewer? The gesture remains a mystery and is not even made clear in his own unpublished manuscripts.¹² These contain comments such as “*People are not Chess pieces, there is no black and white....*,” and “*black and white are not colors, but extreme nuances...*”¹³

He describes his dream of spreading Christianity in Africa, and about a conscious link of himself to people and places in Africa. Had these been published at the time, Adolf Badin would clearly head the list of early spokesmen for Black consciousness.¹⁴ Otherwise, there is very little from his perspective about the day-to-day events at the Courts and monarchies he served, and nothing written by his widow, Magdalena Eleonora Norell (who was also known as “*moriansänkan*”, or the morian’s widow) has been published. In his analysis of Badin in Swedish history, Allan Pred finds sees his images in paintings and films as an icon for the institutionalization of structural racism. But who knows, perhaps that index finger was his way of cautioning the viewer in making an erroneous judgment about him. That too, is part of this story.

Unfortunately, the written and oral histories of Africans and African Diasporans in Sweden is not yet a priority issues considering the size of their population. Aside for the occasional painting or records in church archives, there is hardly any historical literature about Africa's peoples in Sweden, and even less about the many persons who campaigned to keep Sweden slave-free.

POST WW2 ARRIVALS:

AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS AND POLITICAL EXILES

Shortly after World War II, Sweden opened up its doors to foreign labor migration. Most of this labor came from neighboring Scandinavian countries or from southern Europe, But during the 1950s and 60s, most African Americans who came to reside in Sweden did so to join family members (wives, husbands), or in the promotion of their arts.¹⁵ The largest number of this group came from the United States when compared to those from the Caribbean or South America, for example. Some now famous musicians and artists had brief residencies in Sweden, but there were some 100-odd lesser known musicians who lived here too. Scores of jazz musicians, choreographers and others came to Sweden during that time and made lasting contributions to the development of post-war Swedish artists, dancers and singers.¹⁶ There were also a few writers and filmmakers, the most famous being Jack Jordan, who produced *Georgia-Georgia* (1972) which was directed by Stig Bjorkman. Mr. Jordan was also a co-producer of *Ganja and Hess* (1974, Kelly-Jordan Productions) and a number of theater plays in the U.S. A, during the 1960s.¹⁷ The early group also included painters, well-known boxers and their sparring partners, one of whom became a well-known anti-war journalist named Sherman Adams.

The most famous African American to visit Sweden was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Following his assassination, scores of African American men – and a handful of women – eager to escape the racial violence and political strife that was raging throughout the United States at that time landed in Sweden. Nearly all the civil rights activists at the time came here and some stayed for a number of years. Eldridge Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton and scores of lesser-known members of the Black Panther Party and other civil rights organizations found support, and in some cases refuge, in Sweden from the ravages of the 1960s in the United States. Sweden, its people and the policies of politicians such as Olof Palme welcomed us with open arms.¹⁸

Unfortunately, there can never be an accurate account of the number of African Americans who lived in Sweden at that time, or any other, for the simple reason that Sweden maintains statistics based on *citizenship* or *place of birth*, not race. This means that even though the total number of “North American citizens” living in Sweden in 1998 was recorded as 14, 747 persons, there is no accurate record of how many were African Americans. Such a system of census taking clearly leaves the question of percentages based on race at the mercy of conjecture. Hence, there is little hard evidence to counter the notion that the African American percentages of “North Americans” in Sweden could never have been more than 3%. But even that small number would be a pawn in the political debates on the presence of U.S. Army deserters here during the 1970s.¹⁹

THE BAD ICONS OF THE 1970S

It has been estimated that during the Vietnam war era, between 600 and 800 US deserters came to Sweden, and that approximately 15% of these were African Americans.²⁰ But if this is accurate, it would mean that there were more African American deserters than non-deserters here during that time, a probability that is very feasible, since ethnic statistics were never taken. There were also one or two other American minority group deserters here during that time, but the first African American to receive wide attention in the Swedish press was Ray Jones, from Pontiac, Michigan . He was at times accredited as being the “first” American

deserter. The second was a fellow named Terry Whitmore, who was the subject of a documentary film that was made in the mid-Sixties. There are no available records of any female deserters.²¹

Even though they were humanely provided with minimums of shelter and food, US deserters were not a preferred group of immigrants in Sweden. This was best reflected in the fact that they were never accorded full “refugee status”, as those who were escaping Communist regimes were.²² Instead, US deserters were allowed to stay in Sweden on “humanitarian grounds”, which gave them none of the monthly economic subsidies accorded those fleeing the Communist countries. This led to their failure to integrate into the Swedish labor force, and a small cadre of them turned to street-crimes as a means to support themselves. The upper Chamber of the Swedish Parliament heard criticisms of the failure of US deserters to assimilate in the early 1970s from members of the conservative parties and the national police. Scores of convictions for narcotic crimes, rapes, assaults, theft, armed robbery and even two murders were attributed to the U.S. military deserters. And although the number of African Americans who were convicted for such crimes was less than 5% of the total number of U.S. deserters here, the Swedish press and other media made them the icon for all US deserters. It was a convenience that enabled the Swedish right-wing and conservative parties to embarrass the Socialist and Communist coalition government’s policies under the leadership of Olof Palme. When President Jimmy Carter’s Amnesty was adopted most of the deserters returned home. Today, there are only a few (less than 20) African American military deserters living in Sweden.

AFRICAN AMERICAN BUSINESSES IN SWEDEN

Only a small number of Africans and Diasporans opened small businesses Sweden, and most would close after only a short period of operation. There were a number of attempts to open automobile dealerships, clothing stores, camera and photography shops, modeling agencies, tailor shops, grocery stores, fast food stores, newspaper stands and other service-oriented businesses, but such efforts failed due largely to an inability to network with the closely-knit Swedish business alliances. By the end of the 1970s it was clear that no amount of African American money, time or energy enabled their enterprise to flourish in Sweden. .

One of those failed businesses was a restaurant called “The Best of Harlem” that was opened by Mr. Jack Jordan, the film producer mentioned above. He invested some two-hundred thousand dollars, had guest performances by Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald and Odetta to attract business, and served imported Champaign from France to serve with meals. But it closed after three months due to internal disagreements with his Swedish chef, and the envy it generated amongst neighboring ethnic Swedish restaurant owners. A number of Swedish journalists supported the restaurant, but one, who failed to mention he was coming, described the menu as “slave food” in Sweden’s largest daily newspaper. The restaurant closed after three months.²³

There were some success stories, however. In the southern city of Malmö, a school for jazz ballet and two jazz cafes were successful. Ken Brown, a well-known Jamaican entrepreneur would not only own the most successful jazz ballet school in southern Sweden for five years, but would later open a night club, a record store and an exotic food store within the 15 or more years he lived in Sweden. Ken was also the first African diasporans to hold a Swedish state license to sell alcohol in his club, a license which remains an extremely difficult accomplishment in Sweden. The first of the two jazz clubs was Club Boheme. It was owned by a New Yorker named Clarence Simms, opened in the mid-1970s and was located in the conference room of a local adult education institution (*Folkuniversitet*, which was known then as *Kursverksamhet*). For five years it featured well-known American jazz musicians living in Europe. Saxophonist Dexter Gordon appeared regularly until the law reducing the percentage

of alcohol in beer sold in pubs forced it to close in the late 1970s. Another successful African American club owner in Malmö was Nathaniel Morgan of St. Louis, Missouri. His “*Bros Jazz Cafe*” lasted 10 years, and he had another successful jazz cafe in Copenhagen, Denmark. Both Mr. Simms and Mr. Morgan retired from their businesses and returned to the United States.

Another success story belongs to the small cadre of itinerant merchants who traveled all over Sweden for decades selling their African artifacts and merchandise to generations of friendly, receptive Swedes. One in particular, Mr. Don Dessassaur, appeared at open markets in Sweden for over 30 years and still maintains a colorful shop in the southern city of Malmö.²⁴ There were also a small number of successful painters such as Harvey Cropper and Herbert Gentry, the latter of whom was considered the most successful African American painter in Sweden for three decades.²⁵ There were also a handful of photographers and one sculptor, named Gerry Harris who returned to the U.S. after living in Sweden for nearly three decades.²⁶

But the biggest success story belongs to a native of New Orleans named Ronald B. Antoine, who in 1966 moved to Malmö (in the south of Sweden), after completing a BA in English and French at Southern University, Baton Rouge, La., and in 1969, an MA in English from Lund University in Sweden. Mr. Antoine had also studied French at the University of Paris.

After teaching English and French for several years in Swedish private and public schools, in 1970 Mr. Antoine opened his own intensive language school as well as a translation company in Malmö. In 1971 a branch in Stockholm was added, during which time negotiations were underway with various companies to open branches in Gothenburg, Sweden, Helsinki, Finland, and Hamburg, Germany. Between 1971-1980 Mr. Antoine founded similar companies in Copenhagen, Denmark, Oslo, Norway, and Dorking, England. The schools offered an intensive method of learning in 15 languages, where the pupils would sit for 11 hours a day, totally immersed in the target language. Native English speaking, African American teachers (amongst whom were Edward J. Davis of New Jersey, myself Madubuko A. Diakité and the late Dr. Vernon Boggs) were also part of the multi-national staff which alternated in three to four hour shifts teaching hundreds of Swedish and Danish businessmen beginning and advanced levels of the languages they needed to sell their industrial products and services world-wide. The school in Malmö was successful for more than 15 years before closing for good in the 1980s, when Mr. Antoine relocated his successful companies and teaching method to Spain. In 1992 Mr. Antoine moved to Germany, where he still maintains a highly successful intensive language school and translation company.²⁷

JOB MARKET PROBLEMS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN ACADEMICIANS

The African American population in Sweden during the 1960s also included a small number of academicians, but the unwillingness of Swedish employers to employ them after they received their Swedish education led to their departure from Sweden or to changing their goals for employment. Although there was a shortage of teachers during the late 1960s, one newly graduated African American with a Swedish masters degree in education was asked if he could teach dance during the interview. Although the school needed teachers in math and sciences, teaching dance was the only possible opening for this African American graduate.²⁸

While most of the white American academics who came to Sweden did so with the sponsorship of their parents or an exchange program, many of the African American students came through independent funding programs.²⁹ This means that they often had to take menial jobs to support themselves while taking advantage of Sweden’s no-fee education system. The language within some courses offered no problem as many of the textbooks were imports from the U.S., England or Canada. Besides, teachers took pride in having an American in their classrooms. The opportunity benefited both the teachers and those few students, as the teachers got to “practice” their English while the American students got the education they

wanted. There wasn't a better opportunity for an education anywhere in the United States for those who had to work their ways through college in the USA before Pell Grants and affirmative action programs became a reality.³⁰

One of the most outstanding African American academicians was the late Dr. Vernon Boggs of York College, City University of New York. He published a number of articles about Sweden and its policies towards U.S. deserters in journals in the United States and Sweden.³¹ Much of Dr. Boggs's research focused on the crime-related activities of the few African American deserters in Sweden and Denmark, especially in notorious places such as the *Casanova Bar* or the *Drop In* night clubs in Copenhagen, or at the *Golden Circle*, *Flash In* and other places in Stockholm where they assembled. The resulting doctoral dissertation about their activities and his emphasis on the failure of the Swedish State to integrate them into society provided the definitive motivation for Swedish Parliament to adopt new policies and laws on the integration of immigrants into society on the whole.³²

THE END OF A LOVE AFFAIR

The handful of African Americans in Sweden who live here today seem to be well assimilated even though they are, like other non-European immigrants, the victims of ethnic discrimination on the job and housing markets. To earn a living, most of us have either a low-level service-oriented job, are engaged in the production of a fine art, or are on disability pensions for one reason or another. Based on questions of no less than 20 persons living here, there are fewer than ten African American academicians working within Sweden's universities, fewer still teaching at primary and secondary schools and none at all in medicine or dentistry. None that is, who admit to being an African American.

Within the handful living here there are a few who lived through and experienced the Civil Rights era in the U.S., but only two are active in current Swedish institutions dealing with the struggle against racism and discrimination of all ethnic minorities in Sweden.³³ And there is only one African American in Sweden publishing a newsletter and books on a regular basis.³⁴

NEW AND RECENT ARRIVALS

Today's fresh arrivals of African Americans are nearly all young men who are employed for their skills at basketball to work as coaches or team members. But this is a skills-bank which is not open to other sports where African Americans have a high profile such as boxing or track. Many members of the older generation now have children who, because they attend elementary school here and may have one Swedish parent, have integrated into Swedish society better than they did. But there are also those whose now grown children have left Sweden because they failed to find their place in Swedish society. However, there are some success stories too: the country's most popular Rap artist, Timbuktu, is an African American by parentage (both parents are Americans: one black, one white).

Africans and African Diasporans have had a long, intensive history in Sweden, and have left many legacies. Scores of Swedish singers, musicians and civil rights activists proudly tell long stories of the contributions that African American dancers and musicians made to their own interpretations of the arts and culture. But these stories are never written in Swedish history books or in the chronicles of Swedish art and culture, and the immense African Diasporan contributions to modern Swedish arts and culture are often neglected as often as they are so blatantly mimed today. Few, if any, of the now famous Swedish jazz ballet artists of the 1960s and early 1970s would even know of Herman Howe or Douglas Crutchfield, two of the more profound choreographers who lived and worked in Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s. And fewer still remember any of the achievements in sports, entertainment, arts, literature or science that were made by persons of color whose birthplace and citizenship is "Africa" or "North America".³⁵

In the natural cycle of life, the older generation of African and Diasporans in Sweden is aging and passing on. The new generation, consisting largely of political refugees from sub-Saharan Africa and their families, are beginning to enter the domestic political arena, albeit slowly. The national election of 2001 saw the election of two sub-Saharan Africans to the Swedish Parliament. Hopefully, the younger generation, especially those entering the Swedish political arena will find the need to keep these and other oral histories of the African American presence in Sweden alive. The ball is now in their court.

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Lund, Sweden, June 2005

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² Throughout this article the phrase "Africans and African Diasporans" includes Continentals, Caribbean islanders and North Americans of African descent. M. A. Diakité

³ Ingvar Svanberg & Mattias Tydén: *Tusen år av Invandring, en svensk Kulturhistoria* (Stockholm, 1992) p. 177.

⁴ Ola Larsmo in a synopsis of his book, *Maroonberget* (Stockholm, 1995). Available in Swedish at: www.olalarsmo.com Also in phone conversations with Ylva Eggehorn, *Liljekonvaljekungen* (Stockholm, 2000) in 2005.

⁵ Larsmo, Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ From telephone conversations with Mr. Donald Clayborn of Perris, CA. in 1985. Mr. Clayborn lived in Sweden between 1969 and 1987 and conducted much research on Badin in Sweden and Denmark. He is the author of an unpublished film script on Badin.

⁸ Ola Larsmo, Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Modern Museum flyer on film by Yinka Shonibare's film: *The Assassination of a Swedish King*. www.modernamuseet.se See also M.J. Crusenstolpe: *Moriannen – Adolf Ludvig Badin*; Ylva Eggehorn, Ibid; Ola Larsmo, footnote 2 supra.

¹² Phone conversations with the author Ylva Eggehorn, 2005.

¹³ Larsmo, Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Based on conversations with the late Herbert Gentry, the painter. Mr. Gentry lived in Sweden from 1960 till his demise in Stockholm in 2003.

¹⁶ Conversations with the late Paula Watson, a piano bar player from Los Angeles, CA. Ms. Watson lived in Sweden between 1976 and 2003 when she passed away. A gifted painter on her own right, she played in thousands of piano bars and composed a number of her own songs, most of which remain unrecorded.

¹⁷ Based on conversations with Mr. Jack Jordan in Stockholm (The Best of Harlem), November, 1976.

¹⁸ Based on person experiences, meetings and photographs of these persons. M. A. Diakité. Special thanks also to Mr. McKinley Ruffin, of Chicago, Ill. Mr. Ruffin currently lives in Malmö, Sweden.

¹⁹ Foreign populations are counted only by "citizenship" or "country of birth. See *Sweden in Figures 2000*, published by the Swedish Statistiska centralbyrån (Stockholm, 1999), pp. 12 –13. S

²⁰ Vernon Boggs, "The Case of U.S. Military Deserters in Sweden", *National Journal of Sociology*, (Vol.1:2 Fall 1987): 237-249.

²¹ Conversations with Dr. Boggs, in New York, 1995

²² It took a special act by the Swedish Parliament to approve of a new immigrant status for U.S. deserters. Ibid.

²³ Based on my own personal experiences. I took photos of these artists there at the time. M. A. Diakité.

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- ²⁴ Based on conversations with Mr. Don Franklin Desassaur of Charleston, S.C., who has lived in Sweden since 1964. Mr. Desassaur currently lives in Malmö.
- ²⁵ Based on conversations (with photos) of Herbert Gentry in Stockholm, 1981.
- ²⁶ Based on conversations with Mr. Jerry Harris, who now lives in Portland, Oregon.
- ²⁷ Based on personal experiences as one of the teachers and conversations with Ron Antoine in 2005.
- ²⁸ Based on personal conversations with Dr. Karl Andreasson, *infra*, footnote 15.
- ²⁹ Swedish university officials selecting students are also guilty of racial profiling. Source: Conversations with a university official on the selection committee at Lund University, 2001.
- ³⁰ Personal experience and conversations with Dr. Karl Andreasson, who lived in Sweden for 13 years. Dr. Andreasson currently lives in Athol, Idaho, and teaches at Washington State University.
- ³¹ *Ibid*.
- ³² Based on personal meetings with the late Dr. Boggs at his office in New York City. Special thanks also to Mr. Charles Campbell, of Los Angeles, CA., who has lived in Copenhagen, Denmark since the mid-1960s.
- ³³ One of the 12 Little Rock High School students who needed an escort to attend school back in 1957 lives in Sweden today.
- ³⁴ The Lundian Magazine: www.thelundian.com
- ³⁵ Based on conversations in Stockholm with Dr. Lena Sawyer, a social anthropologist teaching in Öresund, 2005.

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