

Praise for *Another Chance, Maybe the Last*

“I highly recommend that all readers emerge themselves into Keleti Sanon’s quest for the acknowledgement of the common heritage between African and African American people. His book, *Another Chance, Maybe the Last*, is a heartfelt invitation from an African brother who encourages us to free our minds from the misconceptions that separate us. Sanon’s refreshing perspective reveals that the time is right for us to explore and embrace our connection...ultimately becoming better people. This book is a road map toward unity.” - LaTonya Branham, college administrator, adjunct professor, and author of *CultureSeek: Connecting to African and African American History* and *Spirit Seek: Words from Scriptures That Transform Your Life*

“With a kind and omniscient eye, Keleti Sanon accurately explains the feud within both the African and American cultures; the obvious misunderstanding to which he provides a solution may bridge the gap of intolerance we know so well and allow a peace which could only empower us.” - Linnea Munch, writing/linguistic student at the University of Arkansas

ANOTHER CHANCE MAYBE THE LAST

RELATIONS BETWEEN AFRICAN
AMERICANS AND AFRICANS

KELETI SANON



Mandingo Publishing

Another Chance Maybe the Last

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DEDICATION

Family, friends and acquaintances come into our lives for a reason. Some relationships last for a lifetime, and some last only for a season, leaving their mark upon your life and then they move on, but the person whose life is touched never forgets the impact upon his or her life.

This book is dedicated to all the people who have touched my life and made an impact in guiding me toward who I am today. I thank you for giving me a reason to write and to say what is coming from my heart. I thank you for touching my African spirit.

William Mory Sano, my son in Virginia

Moussa Traore Sanogo, my son in Chicago

Moussa Toure and Kaba Sano, my brothers in New York City

Cheick Diarra (May his body rest in peace)

Namassa Sanogo, Assita Sano, my sisters in Chicago and Philadelphia

Toure Moutaga, my brother-in-law in Philadelphia

Mariama Camara (Poupette), my niece in Atlanta

Bourahima Fofana in Philadelphia

Djeneba Kane and the twins in Philadelphia

Tina Myles, my special friend in Little Rock, Arkansas

Frank Mills in the Bronx, New York

Sidiki Kaba in Minneapolis.

To all my New York friends and coworkers who offered support in my beginning years; and to the Africans and African-Americans who are making an attempt to connect. To those who write, dance, draw, sing, and dream so our next generation knows where they come from, I say thank you for realizing the importance.

There is an old Mandingo proverb that says: "*It doesn't matter how long a piece of wood has been in the river, it will never turn into a fish.*" This simply means, that it doesn't matter how long the African-American has been here in the United States, they are still of Africa, we are all one. We cannot change our history or our heritage.

FOREWORD

BY MARILYNN GRIFFITH

As the child of an African father and an African-American mother, I've always wanted to know more about Africa. Doing so in America, however, hasn't always been easy.

I remember children in my elementary school shouting, "She's half-African! Don't mess with her!" I didn't know why my classmates thought that "African" meant something bad. Before coming to school, I'd thought that it meant something good. I quickly learned that my fellow students expected me to swing across the room like Tarzan without notice. Frustrated, sometimes I did just that.

As I got older, there were some positive comments—"How do you say your name? That's pretty"—but for the most part, my African background was a box of fading airmail letters, the faint memory of my father's scent and some Nigerian art in my cousin's living room. (They tell me that my father sold African art—after he got off his day job as an engineer, of course.)

Over the years, I've met a lot of people like me—African-American—but still trying to understand the hyphen. We wander in and out of African associations, chided because we don't know the language or we've never been "home." We clamor for relationships with all things African, usually including food and clothes. And then one day, we accept what we have and ask God to fill in the gaps.

In many ways, this book fills some of those gaps. Though Mr. Sanon is from Ivory Coast, the explanations about his

culture have given me a new understanding about Africa as a whole. I hope this book helps all Americans understand Africa—and America—better.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I became an American citizen in 1996 after coming to this country with no way to communicate, nowhere to go, and no one to help me. I struggled through the streets of New York City, carving out a life as a cab driver, car wash attendant and security guard. My travels around the US have given me an opportunity to witness the power of the American and African connection. While my black cousins in America have offered me help in learning about this country, this book is my gift in return: a chance to bring all Africa's children together, united in color and culture.

I no longer want to meet African-Americans and feel that the Atlantic Ocean divides us. Though the native African has a strange accent and different customs from the African-American, we are both part of a worldwide nation of black and brown people who sprung from Africa.

It is this understanding of family and community that we Africans have to offer America. As one who came to the US with nothing and went on to graduate college twice and become an aircraft mechanic and American citizen, I extend my hand to both Africans and Americans on the pages of this book. I pray that we can come together while we still have a chance.

One Love,
Keleti Sanon

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“We must go back and reclaim our past so that we can move forward; So we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.” –Unknown

CHAPTER ONE

AFRICAN-AMERICAN: UNDERSTANDING THE DIVIDE

“How do you feel about American blacks being called African-Americans? They’re not really Africans. They don’t know anything about Africa.”

This comment hurt me deeply and prompted questions of my own. “These people are my family, my cousins. I am honored that they would call themselves African-Americans. Why does this bother you so much?”

I never got an answer, but the question lingered in my mind, rekindling my passion to bring those of African birth and African blood together in America. It also made me reconsider what “African-American” really means and what it could mean, if we dare to redefine it.

LABELING A LEGACY

Blacks in America have been called many things since being forced onto slave ships in Africa. Some of those names were painful and humiliating. Others, like Afro-American or the more well-known term Black, sought to give black people in America the same identification with their land of origin that other hyphenated Americans had. The difference? Those other hyphenated cultures (Asian-American, Italian-American, etc.) had immigrated to US with their language, culture and customs

intact. American Blacks had been purchased or captured and brought to a place where the dominant culture spent the next 400 years beating their language and land out of their memory.

Connecting with one's country of origin isn't easy when your ancestors are listed "male slave" or "female slave." And yet all people long to know where they come from. American blacks even gave themselves a name that reflects their ancestry: African-American.

It's a small but loaded word, connecting a country to a continent, reuniting through language Africa's great-great-great-great-grandchildren with their Motherland. And yet, a hyphen still separates them, symbolizing today's divide between American-born blacks and African-born immigrants. The Middle Passage was the first journey Africans had to survive. Bridging the hyphen that divides us is just as crucial.

AFRICANS IN AMERICA

According to US Census statistics, there are 1.4 million African immigrants in the US ¹. This means the number of voluntarily African immigrants may even exceed the number of Africans brought to the US as captives. ² In the eyes of many Africans, America is a land full of successful cousins who will be like their family. What the African immigrant finds upon arrival to America, however, is often quite the opposite.

¹ "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics." 2007. *Department of Homeland Security*. <<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/LPR07.shtm>>.

² Roberts, Sam. "More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery." *The New York Times*. 21 Feb. 2005
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/21/nyregion/21africa.html?_r=1&scsp=1&sq=more%20africans%20voluntarily%20than%20slavery&st=cse>.

Though called the United States, America is still segregated in many ways, such as race, class, and culture. Each of these divisions can be a shock to outsiders who only know America through movies and media. Unlike the hostile streets of Paris or London, where an African is immediately recognized as an immigrant, the African anticipates being thought of as one of the obviously successful entertainers or athletes he's seen portrayed on international television.

Instead, he may find himself mistaken for an American black and treated with less respect than he is accustomed to. (Some Africans, like myself, like being considered as an American at first glance.) Africans quickly learn that non-blacks seem to respect Africans more than African-Americans.

As in the days of slavery, outsiders have a big impact on the relations between native Africans and American blacks. Centuries of slavery taught blacks in America to disdain anything related to Africa. To succeed, they were taught to be as "white" as possible, in appearance, speech and otherwise. The native African comes to America bent on achieving success. While he feels love for his African-American cousins, he senses that the feeling might not be mutual. He also doesn't want to do anything that will hurt his chances for success. Still, most Africans will settle in African-American communities upon arriving to the U.S.

Sylviane A. Diouf, a historian and researcher at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center, explains the American view of African immigrants versus American-born blacks. "They [African immigrants] are better educated, they're here to

work, to prosper, they're more compliant and don't pose a threat."³

This feeling may also be tied to the fact that Africans have not been as politically mobilized or concerned with slavery reparations as African-Americans. Most Americans know that many African immigrants are more concerned with the politics and problems of their home countries than their continued battles with African-Americans over Affirmative Action and other issues.

New York State, where I myself first arrived, draws the most African immigrants, but large numbers of Africans can be found in most American cities. For instance, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and Houston have some of the largest African immigrant populations after New York City. However, Africans can also be found in great numbers in more rural states, such as Minnesota, Maine, and Oregon.

Though many arrive to see the upraised arm of the Statue of Liberty, Africans quickly learn that despite America's great possibility for progress, the minds of many of its citizens—both black and white—are not yet free. Though the immigrant will press on so that he can succeed for himself, his family and his country, he often does so while passing by his American-born black cousins, who sometimes seem still shackled in their minds and the minds of others.

As much as race is an impact, the African learns quickly that socioeconomic class is also a big factor in how a person is treated in America. If one wants to overcome the lingering stigma of being considered "black" in the US (usually meaning

³ Roberts. *New York Times*.

American-born), he must only amass the right education and a significant amount of “green.” Most Africans come to America for a better life, so education and prosperity are already their desire. (US African immigrants send an average of one billion dollars a year to their families and friends⁴.) As they achieve, however, the gap between their American-born Black cousins widens, both in performance and perception.

Culture is also a huge change for Africans arriving in America. Though most Africans have seen American television, the reality of how detached people are from their families can be shocking. It can be very confusing to see American-born blacks behaving the same way. Some Africans only associate with other Africans or even with people from their own country for this reason. Determined to “stay African,” they separate into communities which become havens of African culture. It is this culture that can be a gift to the community of American blacks who may never know their personal African ancestry due to slavery.

Though Africans continue to rise above race, class and cultural differences in America, they cannot avoid sharing identity with their American-born cousins. *Both* are African-American. In fact, many of the programs and policies which allow African immigrants to succeed and ascend in society are a result of efforts of American blacks. Though slavery was and continues to be a horrible legacy in American history, the efforts to redress slavery’s wrongs have allowed native Africans the chance to reclaim the wealth stolen from their countries through slavery and colonialism. In exchange, we bring the gift

⁴ Roberts. *New York Times*.

of our African culture and understanding. A gift that often goes unclaimed.

The over 60,000 African immigrants who come to America each year, while less than the flood of immigrants from Asia and Latin America, continue to redefine the African-American identity. Along with those arriving from the Caribbean, African immigrants now make up more than 25 percent of the black population in America. In New York City, 1 in 3 blacks are foreign-born. And that's only counting the legal immigrants who usually arrive on family reunification or diversity visas. These Africans often speak English and already have a college degree. The number of illegal African immigrants is thought to be as many as four times the reported numbers.⁵

Though these statistics have exciting implications for what it means to be "black" in America, mainstream thought still considers African immigrants and American-born blacks as separate and distinct groups. This trend accentuates the hyphen in African-American, the term that continues to anger many people.

Though many immigrant groups surpass African-Americans in achievement and prosperity, it can be painful for Africans to leave their cousins behind. Differences of culture and thinking, however, leave the gap between them widening.

"Historically, every immigrant group has jumped over American-born blacks," said Eric Foner, the Columbia University historian. "The final irony would be if African immigrants did, too."⁶

⁵ Roberts. *New York Times*.

⁶ Roberts. *New York Times*.

Not only would it be ironic for African immigrants to surpass American-born blacks, it would be tragic. Though history forced Africans apart, God has brought us back together. We, both African-born and American-bred blacks, must now share what is lacking with the other in regards to culture and conduct so that all of Africa's sons and daughters may rise.

While some Africans and those most commonly referred to as African-Americans, American-born blacks, may not care whether they are considered as separate groups, the reality is that our gold, amber, honey, chocolate, cinnamon and yes, black skin will always reveal that we are one. A few generations from now, there will likely be no African and African-American. Race will have been replaced with culture. The question is will there be any African culture left in America? I hope so.

As we celebrate the achievement of electing an African-American president, all black people in America must consider that this may also signal the end of many of the programs and policies designed to undo the wrongs of slavery. In the end, we may all be left to deal with the America that faces an African arriving, something very opposite from what we expect. With the world changing both Africa and America, we have been brought together in America for such a time as this—another chance, perhaps the last.

