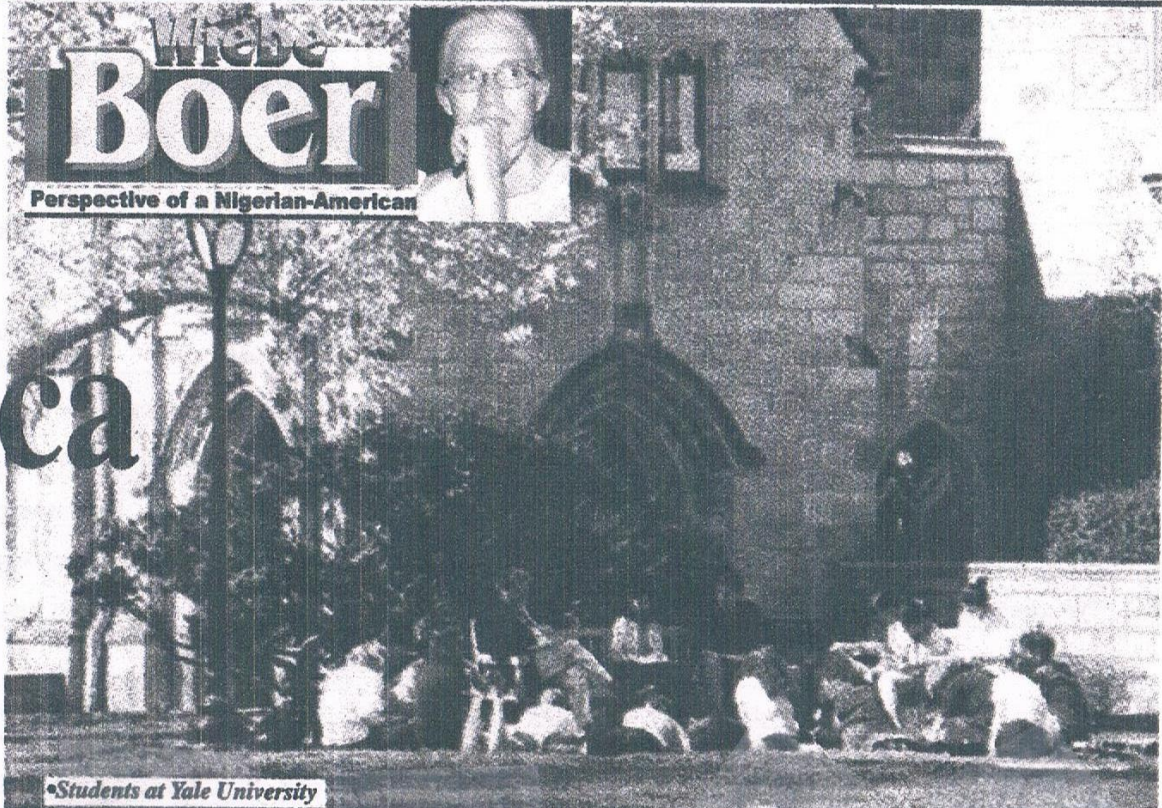


African students in America



•Students at Yale University

IN 1774, even before the beginning of the American Revolution, two sailors from the Gold Coast, Bristol Yamma and John Quamine, enrolled at the College of New Jersey, the predecessor of Princeton University.

These men were not only the first Africans to enroll in an institution of higher education in what would become the United States, but the first of any students of African descent. Although most Africans who went abroad for education went to Europe, an increasing number began following the footsteps of Yamma and Quamine to the United States.

In the 1900s, the trickle became a flood. As the number of African students in the United States increased, some began to see a need for closer coordination between them. In the 1920s, two remarkable Ugandans – Ernest Kalibala and Akiki

Nyabongo – led the way through their leadership in the African Student Union (ASU).

Following advice and assistance from Nnamdi Azikiwe, fourteen promising young West Africans went to the United States for university education in the 1930s. These men, including Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Nigeria's K. Mbadiwe, allied with the two Ugandans from the ASU to further the cause of African student activism in the United States by founding the African Students Association (ASA) in 1941. The association's goals were to interpret Africa to Americans, and to work for the continent's complete economic and political freedom.

Nearly fifty years and several generations of African students have passed since the founding of ASA. Although ASA itself no

longer exists, African students in the United States have continued to organize. As a sign that the trend has carried on, over the Easter weekend nearly 200 African students gathered in Boston for the fifth annual conference of the International African Students Association (IASA).

As was evident, the goals of African students in the United States has not changed much since the 1940s. Instead, the biggest changes are not only their sheer numbers, but the fact

that so many of them are now in the top universities in the United States.

Hosted jointly by the African students organizations of Northeastern University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Wellesley College, and Harvard University, the theme of IASA 2000 was "The Youth as a Vehicle for Progress in the 21st Century: Forging Links Towards an African Renaissance."

The conference included panels on youth activism, entrepreneurship, social transformation, healthcare,

governance, and technology. Some of the featured speakers were Naomi Tutu, the daughter of Archbishop Tutu, Professor Mark Chijioko, former Dean of Engineering at the University of Nigeria, and Oby Ezekwesili of Transparency International.

Although students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana dominated the event, there were students in attendance from across the continent who are now studying in universities and colleges throughout the United

States. Present because of their shared passion for the continent and their realization that their privileged access to education abroad accords them a responsibility to those who do not have the opportunity, the students expressed both a genuine desire to contribute to change back home as well as a frustration of how to really do that.

James Mbugua, a Kenyan who is presently the president of the Yale African Students Association, expressed this frustration when

he challenged Naomi Tutu saying, "You and others keep saying that we are the great hope for Africa's future, yet you never tell us how exactly we can contribute. What are we supposed to do?"

Although the question was never properly answered, at the end of the conference following a fabulous cultural show, there was a sense of general optimism and that the conference had been worth the effort of the organizers and participants. Saratu Nafziger, a student at Boston University who hails from Jos, commented,

"This conference brought people together to remind us of why we are here and to help us refocus our goals towards how we can contribute to the African continent." Folarin Oke, formerly of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, came all the way from his present base at Calvin College in Michigan for the conference. He was very impressed by the organization of the conference and said, "It was inspiring to be around so many African students and see that we share a common vision."

From the perspective of the organizers, it was also a success. These young men and women and their good effort are further proof of the great potential of African youth abroad. Chinezi

Chijioko of the Harvard African Students Association said, "It has been exciting to see it all come together and to observe the spirited discussions through which everyone was challenged."

Nneoma Nwogu, one of the organizers from Wellesley College and a talented young Nigerian poet, added, "A lot of people put a lot of work in and it came out very well. It was not about the panelists telling us to do specific things, it was about them inspiring us in our own varied ways. We learned that it does not matter who you are - we can all contribute to Africa."

Kemi Ogunjimi, a veteran of such conferences and the present chair of the IASA steering committee, thanked all those involved for their hard work. Exhausted after all the efforts put in to the conference, but inspired for the future, she commented, "The

difference between this and past conferences is that people now seem more hungry for real change."

The desire of African students abroad to contribute in various ways back home remains strong. Although they are frustrated by the lack of direction, they are still dedicated to finding opportunities to return home and put their education to good use. Nigeria can certainly only benefit from the energy and experiences of all her talented sons and daughters presently abroad.

Hopefully opportunities for them will be found in both the private and public sector to enable them contribute to the fullest of their capacities.

