

# Francophone African Oral History

**Interviewer:** Good evening!

**Interviewee:** Good evening!

**Interviewer:** I'm going to interview you in the relation to our project "Francophone African Oral History" in Birmingham.

Who is Jacques Mantezi?

**Interviewee:** Jacques mantenzi, I'm the youngest of a big family of 11 children. My dad's name was Jean Mantezi Mobongo and my mother's name was Justine Mayenga; both of them had passed away.

I was born in 1973 at a Catholic parish in Kingunge, Kinzenzengo sector, Masimanimba territory, Kwilu sub-region, Bundundu region in DR Congo.

It's there in Kingunge, specifically in Leta city that I had taken my primary school at Tata Onda primary school, from year 1 to year 5.

After that I had moved 10 miles away from where I was before, and then I went to the parish mission at Mbetidikiese School, which belonged to "Freres Josephites" of Kinzambi.

I did my secondary school in 1984 still in Kingunge at Institut Ntwadisi of "Freres Josephites" of Kinzambi, I had taken Literacy subject, Latin-Philo, and then I got my diploma in 1990.

After 1990, I came to University of Kinshasa, where I only studied for a year, unfortunately; it was the year where all Universities were closed due to political unrest, in 1991.

I went to “Facultes Catholique de Kinshasa” where I had taken “Science and Development Technics” subject, which today is called “Development economics” and “Facultes Catholique de Kinshasa” has become “University Catholique au Congo”.

I had completed my master in 1998.

**Interviewer:** Let’s go back in the village, where you were born.  
Can you describe your village?

**Interviewee:** My village was a colonial city.

The Belgium colonists had built 26 houses with sustainable materials and what I can reveal to people is that, Leta city is a “**water paradise**”; I have been around the world and never seen water like what I have seen in Leta city.

I would give an example, in 26 houses built by Belgium colonists; there were shower inside the houses and they have never used motor pump, only because the water source was in the mountain and they had simply set up a **gravity supply**, which would distribute water in any corner of the city.

And everywhere you would go in the village; there were a fountain or a river just in about 10 minutes away from the village. It was really splendid.

The colonists had left in 1958, because of the upcoming Congo’s independence. They had sold those 26 houses to pensioners of education.

When the pensioners of education had settled in those houses, and then people started moving in.

People would build their houses with sustainable materials and some would use semi durable materials, where you would have plates above, clays and sticks on the wall.

My dad had bought one of the 26 houses from Belgium colonists.  
We would use shower before going to school.

Life is completely deferent now compare to the way it used to be.

Back then my father was a pensioner of education and my mother was an housewife, she used to go to the field with us; life was very good and impeccable.

It was a small city built with urban planning rules with beautiful houses and streets.

**Interviewer:** Were there showers in those new houses?

**Interviewee:** There was no shower in the new houses, only water tap outside.  
We had a house built with sustainable materials.  
Some people had houses with semi durable materials and there were also houses in straw for some families.

Everybody could have access to a clean drinking water across the city but in the other hand those living near rivers, would use river water.

**Interviewer:** Can you describe your primary school?  
How were your teachers like?

**Interviewee:** I had a good impression of my teachers, except one of them. Since my primary school, I had had good tutors and they were all matures and skilled in education.

For the first time in my life, I had failed the class when I was in year 3, first term. It was really distressing; I had failed because of that one teacher that we did not get along.

After that failure, I had passed all my classes until I had completed my primary school. I was a brilliant pupil.

Two of the classrooms were built with sustainable materials and the rest in straw.

The school had nice desks as well.

The head teacher office was built with sustainable materials.

I had a good relationship with everybody in the school; it was very nice.

**Interviewer:** How were holidays like?

**Interviewee:** During holidays, we would accompany our parent in the forest just to have fun and we would bring some cassava leaves or firewood on the way back.

We would do sport activities everyday.

We would also go to the river.

And when we were not in forest, we would spend all day swimming in the river from 9am to 4pm and then we would play football afterward.

Sometimes we would not even take shower after playing football and go to bed just like that.

In the other hand, during school time, we would play football after class, take shower and then go to bed.

**Interviewer:** Where are your brothers and sisters?

**Interviewee:** One of my brothers is a catholic priest in Germany.

My sister is in Belgium.

I also have cousins and uncle here in Europe.

Seven members of my family are in Congo.

Unfortunately, one of my brothers has passed way in 2007.

Five of my brothers are in Kinshasa; one in Kikwit and one in the village where we all grew up.

We are all in contact thanks to the new technology.

**Interviewer:** What did you do next after your studies?

**Interviewee:** After my studies, I was managing the family vehicles business and I was also a consultant of development project.

That's what I was doing apart from my political engagement.

Then I came to Europe.

**Interviewer:** How did you come to Europe?

**Interviewee:** I had decided to come to Europe due to political unrest in the Congo.

**Interviewer:** What was your first impression when you had arrived in England? When did you come?

**Interviewee:** I came in England in August 2002.

I could not speak English.

My first impression, I had come across with nice people, in the sense that, they knew that I came from a French speaking country but they would manage to communicate with you. For instance, when I came, I wanted to find where the library was and then I had asked Congolese friends that we used to share house, they had indicated me to go on the main road, and then turn to my left and then I would see the library.

I went down to the main road but I had lost my way, so I would ask someone in my broken English “Where is the **Bibliothèque**” and the person could not understand and then I would say “Read Book” and then the person had indicated me where the library was.

I remember being the first person to receive the library card when they first introduced the new **log in** system to access the Internet in Peterborough.

Even with my broken English, I could communicate with people; they were very kind and sociable to me.

Eventually, I had encouraged other friends to join the library, read and use the Internet.

My friends ended up putting the Internet in their bedroom because I had showed them the importance of it.

**Interviewer:** How did you learn English?

Did you learn by yourself or did you enrol at a college?

**Interviewee:** Because I arrived in August, there was an opportunity to enrol at the college; I had enrolled at Peterborough regional college at Entry 3.

There was no choice; everyone who wanted to integrate in the British society would go through college to learn English.

**Interviewer:** Apart from English lessons, what else did you do in England?

**Interviewee:** What I can say is that when I had progress in level 1 and 2 in English, I had started my first job as a support worker, which is a long-time career for me. I was working with people with learning disabilities since 2006.

In September 2006, I was recommended to do NVQ in Health and Social Care level 2, and then the next year I had progressed to level 3, which I had completed in 2008.

In 2009, I went to University to study Social Care and Social Policy at Wolverhampton University where I had received Bachelor Arts with honours in Health and Social Care and in Social Policy in 2012.

**Interviewer:** How did you find yourself in Peterborough?

**Interviewee:** Peterborough is a beautiful city; I had stayed there quite some times. I really liked over there and had spent good times.

I had a friend of mine who used to live in Birmingham Solihull and a cousin of another friend of mine who also was living in Birmingham. We all had studied at “Universite Catholique au Congo”.

I would often come to visit my friend over here in Birmingham and eventually I had moved to Birmingham in 2005, as I wanted to live in the big city.

**Interviewer:** So, you have your first job in Birmingham?

**Interviewee:** Yes, my first job was in Birmingham.

**Interviewer:** How did you get that job?

**Interviewee:** First, I had a night job at a warehouse.

When I had arrived in Birmingham, I did training in Forklift, which had allowed me to get a job in the warehouse.

I only worked there for a month because the salary that proposed to me was different to the one published, that's why I had left.

When I had left that job, I had decided to work as a support worker in care.

I was looking for a job at many company but they did not want to hire me because my English was not good enough.

One day, I had attended a job workshop and had showed my interest in working as support worker in the Midlands area. I had filled up the “**Interest Form**”, which was return to me few days later and they had called me for an interview.

My friend’s cousin Jean Pierre had accompanied me to the interview. I was interviewed by the vice manager. After the interview, the vice manager would tell me “**Your English has French accent**” and then I would reply to him that “**Obviously, I came from a French Speaking Country!**” He had started laughing.

The next day I would be hired, I had worked there from 2006 to 2013. I was still working there even when I was at the University.

**Interviewer:** Are you still working in the same area of job?

**Interviewee:** I had left worker as support worker for people with learning disabilities, to work with homeless single people for a year at a charity called “Swanswell”. I was also working as a money advice worker.

Unfortunately, in 2014 the charity has lost financial support, so I have to leave that job and find another one.

I have found another job in Health service at NHS to work with people with mental issues. It was a good job with a decent salary but I was considered as an under employee because the job did not reflect me competences.

I have left NHS and return working as a support worker but this time I would work as a family support worker for a year; I would help family with children.

After that, I would work at Shelter as a homeless family support worker.

Technically, those families are not on the streets but they are families at the risk of becoming homeless, with temporally or inconvenient accommodation. I would help them to find a suitable accommodation.

It makes me feel proud of myself as a Francophone coming from Congo and being able to help people over here in England.

**Interviewer:** Do you like what you do?

**Interviewee:** Absolutely, when we had arrived; others helped us, so it's our turn to help as well.

**Interviewer:** What sort of communities did you find in Birmingham?

**Interviewee:** Talking about Congolese community, we were not well organised, each was living in their corner and the only place you would meet Congolese was in Patmos, Aston at **Wenze Ya Bana Mboka**. There were two shops and barbershops.

In my experience, most of the Congolese people at that time, could not speak English, so we had set up a project to help those with no English knowledge. We would help them in translation, interpretation, and reading letters or refer them to appropriate services.

**Interviewer:** Was there any restaurant or church for Africans to meet up?

**Interviewee:** Yes, there were churches for sure, like "**La Victoire**", **Esperance**, **La porte des Brebis**" and some restaurants.

Each us would go to church where they usually go and we would only gather when there is a big event like a conference or a convention.

We knew each other.

I also knew some Africans that we used to meet up, Togolese and people from Ivory cost.

**Interviewer:** What's your experience with other communities?

**Interviewer:** I would speak on my personal experience, as I said earlier on, in November 2005, we had set up a small project called "Masho" **Lisho** in Swahili which means "**Eye to see what going on within the community**" we had called it "MASHO EYE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION"

From that, I had moved to Smethwick and we had started organising community events specifically for Congolese and Francophone. We would help them in housing, health service, fire training etc.

We would also work with other communities, like, Somalia, Bangladesh, and Pakistani.

We would invite British born citizens to participate in our workshops.

We were working in connection with other associations as well.

I was really active in the point that, I was among the steering group for a year, which is a reflexion group for the regeneration of Windmill Eye Neighbourhood in Smethwick.

Today, Windmill Eye Neighbourhood is completely transformed with beautiful houses and building thanks to the steering group I was part of.

And instead of dissolving the steering group after the project, we have formed a new initiative called “Victoria’s **friends and Neighbours Community Interest Company**”, which I’m the director.

So, all started from “MASHO” initiative and then eventually we have progressed and continue working with other people.

The name MACHO has been changed to “**Africa French Speaking Community Support**”.

At the moment, the charity is focused on everything that happening in local community and we are working with everybody without discrimination.

My experience working with other communities has been positive.

**Interviewer:** What has changed since you have arrived in Birmingham?

**Interviewee:** The number of Congolese and Francophone has grown.

There are more families and people are more open.

In the event like funeral, you would see around five to six hundred people.

There are more churches; back then there were only three to four churches but today there are around 25 Congolese churches, so the community has grown.

If back then, there was only 1 shop; today there are 3 or 4 shops.

There are more restaurants and barbershops.

There are more initiatives from our African compatriots and Congolese in particular.

There has been a big change.

There are more associations that help others, back then there was only “Mango” association but now there are more and they are doing a good job.

**Interviewer:** What about Birmingham itself, how it has changed?

**Interviewee:** It’s a little bit difficult to describe the city but I would say that the population has grown.

Unexploited sites back then, are now filled with buildings, for instance; next to Catholic Cathedral at Saint Chad, there was a roundabout around there but today it has completely changed and polished.

Even in Ladywood, there was a roundabout but now it has changed.

There was also a roundabout in West Bromwich, which would cause lot traffic but they have built an underpass.

There has been a lot works in Birmingham.

In Smethwick where I live, there were a lot of free spaces and bushes but today it’s all covered with houses and buildings.

There has been kind of evolution in term of Town planning and development.

The quality of buses has changed for the better, including the new travel pass system.

There are more immigrants now and everywhere you go, you would find a Congolese family compare to back then where most of people would only live in Aston, Ladywood or Handsworth but today there are families in Northfield, Baddeley Green and Solihull.

**Interviewer:** Does African culture is present in Birmingham?

**Interviewee:** That's what we had tried to do, setting up the African French Speaking Community Support, to share with others our culture.

When there is a community initiative or any event, we would bring our choir to sing Congolese Christian music and we would make people dance.

Recently we had a Cutting and Sewing event to showcase African styles and there will be fashion show in January 2017.

I have seen Congolese and African groups play here in Birmingham. We have done African Art exhibition, not as big as it should be but it's something to be proud of and try to progress.

**Interviewer:** You live in England; do you feel British or you feel like a part of yourself is in Congo?

**Interviewee:** You never forget your roots, the fact that we manage to buy and eat foods coming from Congo, shows that we are not completely British.

I always prefer to call people Papa, Big brother etc. but over here you have to call people by their names, so I still keep those principals from my culture of respecting the elders, women and everybody.

I still keep my culture even though I live here, I would not change it.

**Interviewer:** What do you miss the most from Congo?

**Interviewee:** life is different, over here people stay indoors when they have nothing to do; children stay in their bedrooms but back home, children would go out, play with friends and walk around.

In the morning, people would greet you and talk to you.

Back home, there is more contact and you would feel comfortable.

There is security around you, your children would play around neighbourhood without any anxious, and while over here you cannot let your children play by themselves.

We protect each other.

In the village, where growing up, your friends' parents are your parent and they are allowed to discipline you.

There was solidarity among us.

Here, people keep themselves for themselves and sometimes you feel isolated, no one to talk to, especially when you do not have a wife or children.

People sometimes are lonely here.

People mind their own business and sometimes you do not even talk with your neighbour. It depends what neighbourhood you live in.

**Interviewer:** What is more important for you in life today?

**Interviewee:** My life today, it's to try to apply what the bible teaches us because the bible recommends us to love each other. When you love others, you would be in peace with others and you would be in peace within yourself.

It's not about materials or money but God's peace in you.

The love of one another, help each other; that's more important for me.

**Interviewer:** How many languages can you speak?

**Interviewee:** I can speak my mother tongue Kisuku; two national languages Lingala and Kikongo, official language French and I can speak English as well. I can speak five languages.

**Interviewer:** We are reaching the end of our interview, is there anything that I should have asked you?

**Interviewee:** Just to add that I'm married with madam Zizina Mantezi, we have one child.

My wife and I have managed to do an effort on finding jobs.

**Interviewer:** What was her job?

**Interviewee:** My wife could speak English when she arrived, which allowed her to find a job in cleaning and her manager appreciated the way she works, so she was promoted as a supervisor.

She has helped also many women in our community to find jobs as well, a little bit of what I do, working as a volunteer and helping people within the community.

**Interviewer:** Anything else you would like to add?

**Interviewee:** I would like to see more initiatives within Francophone community, if we could have a community centre that we would do Art exhibition, showcase our heritage and talent, that would be very important for me.

We do not have any place to gather and a lot of people need help but they do not know where to go or who to turn to.

I have seen people struggling with problems and they only ask for help when is too late, for example, someone would wait to be evicted from their home, and then seek for help afterward. People had made a lot of mistakes. But if we have a place where people would come and get information and directions, it would be very important.

Those problems are more frequent nowadays.

**Interviewer:** Within African community!

**Interviewee:** Yes, within African Community.

**Interviewer:** We have finished our interview.  
Thank you very much.

**Interviewee:** Thanks for inviting me, good luck.