

## PROFILE

# Pushing a positive image

West Africa meets a dynamic Ghanaian striving to promote black business interests in the UK and to foster understanding of the African continent

FOR AFRICANS living the world over, and particularly for those of us in the West, a strong public image of the lives of African peoples is an important factor for our continuing peace of mind. Images of Africans making a positive contribution to the economic, political and social life of whichever country they might happen to live in certainly help change perceptions that everything to emerge out of Africa is inferior. And the attitude to work of Africans in the diaspora, our ease with doing business on an international stage and our productivity are just a few of the trump cards that we can play back at home if we decide to return to the Mother Continent.

Ade Sawyer is a man who works in Britain to begin what he one day hopes to see transplanted to an African setting. A certified management consultant and partner in Equinox, the first black-led management consultancy to be established in the UK, his chief objective is to promote the advancement of African and Caribbean peoples in Britain.

'Ade', as he is familiarly known by all, was born in Ghana in 1950, and is a product of no fewer than four famed institutions. He first attended the Accra New Town School, an experimental venture established by Kwame Nkrumah, progressing to Achimota School (which he entered before the age of 10), and then to the School of Administration at the University of Ghana, Legon (where he earned his BSc in Administration) and the renowned Manchester Business School.

His professional career has been equally varied and worthy of note. Straight out of Legon, Ade was appointed one of the youngest officers of Ghana Commercial Bank, the country's largest. He made a quick side-step to work with IBM as a systems engineer at a time when computers were relatively new and few in Ghana. Thereafter, he went into business, becoming managing director of Afro-Asian, an Accra-based travel agency.

Leaving Ghana in 1980, Ade travelled to Manchester to pursue an MBA at the city's highly-regarded business school, majoring in international business and finance. An industrial project that he undertook during a summer break in the two-year course led him to decide that he would like to work in enterprise and community development for the African and Caribbean communities in Britain.

Undertaking a study of the particular problems faced by black-controlled businesses in the UK, Ade found that he had broken new ground academically. Spotting a gap in the market, he began to mull over

ideas for a black-run consultancy firm.

He only realised the half the size of the task that he had set himself. He was yet to do battle directly with the British perception of African and Afro-Caribbean people as incapable of running a business. Nor had he counted on the difficulty with raising finance and settling contracts.

But Ade was up to the job he had made for himself. After all, he had done his homework, thoroughly researching the market and producing a tight business plan. And he still believed that there was a need for his services. The evidence was staring him in the face - high black unemployment statistics, discrimination in the jobs market, large numbers of people in business activity on the African continent ... and therefore the need for Africans in Britain to seriously consider setting up in business for themselves as an alternative to employment by



Ade: 'our skills and drive are perfect for the new Africa'

somebody else.

With two business partners, Ade set up Equinox Consulting in 1983 in Brixton, an area of London that is one of the heartlands of the expatriate African and Afro-Caribbean communities. And that is where the company is still thriving in 1997.

The firm operates nationally and internationally, providing consultancy, training and research services to a variety of clients who include statutory agencies, local authorities, trusts and charities, community groups and entrepreneurs both budding and well-established. Equinox's work has propelled it to a position where it is today the leading black-led management consultancy in Britain.

Over the past two years, Ade has undertaken assignments for the International Finance Corporation in South Africa and in Zimbabwe, and hopes to focus his activities in that direction.

"My aim in work," says Ade, "is to help businesses and entrepreneurs to develop strategies that will help them to establish themselves, and then to guide them to put

in place the kinds of structures that will ensure that they survive in this increasingly harsh economic climate, with its recession, interest rate changes and so on. You can only achieve that by adopting proper management techniques."

Particularly pleasurable for him, he notes, is working for voluntary organisations - after all, he is essentially a community-minded kind of person. Ade thinks that African-run voluntary groups in Britain can be transformed, with a little assistance, into energetic and forward-looking enterprises that provide services to Africans at large. He points to the need that they meet for work amongst Africans and people of Afro-Caribbean origin living in the UK.

"These are the organisations that will employ black managers who are made redundant when they hit the 'glass ceiling'," he stresses, "the groups that will provide a stepping stone for some young graduate looking for his first big break."

In line with this interest in voluntary organisations, Ade is personally involved with black-led groups striving to make a positive change in the lives of their communities. He is a consultant for the country's black-led churches group; an executive member of the Ga-Dangme Nikasemo Asafo, an educational and cultural charity; a key member of the Brixton Small Business Forum; a governor of a primary school in Croydon, one of the suburbs of Greater London; a founding member of the King Tackie Tawiah Memorial Trust; and he is involved with a number of sickle cell groups.

Ade believes that the kind of experience he has gained in Britain can easily be adapted to suit the demands of the Mother Continent. "Community and enterprise development expertise is needed to drive Africa's progress," Ade contends. "If governments focus on the sorts of mechanisms that will create many small businesses, and if these are then well managed, they'll provide jobs and increase the productivity of African countries' economies. Making money is also about community development: the two things shouldn't be separate in people's minds."

Ade is married to Ahinae and they have a nine-year-old son, Nii Anum Olumide. When he isn't relishing 'quality time' with them, he busies himself working in the Ghanaian community in London, doing all he can to enlighten non-Africans and younger Africans who may know nothing of the continent, about life and culture in Ghana, Africa at large and the Caribbean.

"Half the battle is won," quips Ade, "the rest is good management." **R.E.M.**