



South Carolina State University
I. P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium
“The Stanback”
Where

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ORANGEBURG, S.C., November 3, 2008 – The I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium **“The Stanback”** on the campus of South Carolina State University **“SC State”** presents the *Journey Continues*, a series of lectures, workshops and performances accompanying the exhibition, *Journey from Africa to Gullah*. The series continues on **Thursday, November 6th at 5:30 p.m.**, with **His Excellency Bockarie Kortu Stevens “His Excellency Stevens”, the Ambassador of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the United States of America**. His Excellency Stevens will be a special guest of SC State and the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium and will make several appearances as a preamble to SC States’ International Month and its’ host of speakers and activities. On Thursday, following His Excellency, the Stanback will also host **Joseph Opala**, anthropologist and public historian. He will present *“Priscilla’s Homecoming: A Gullah Woman Finds Her Roots in Sierra Leone”*. In addition to His Excellency and Opala, **Amadu Massally**, the chairperson of the Sierra Leone-Gullah Heritage Association, will also be a special guest on Thursday. During their two day stay, each guest will make appearances and give lectures. Please call the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium at **(803) 536-7174** for further information.



His Excellency Stevens was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone. He earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of East London, a Diploma in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Bachelor of Arts, History and Politics degree from Fourah Bay College of Sierra Leone. He served as Grassroots Capacity Building Officer at Southwark Action for Voluntary Organizations in London, Information, Research and Communications Officer for The Children’s Society Refugee and Homelessness Team, Ambassador of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the Republic of Guinea and Personnel Officer for the Sierra Leone Ports Authority.

His research includes *Making a New Life in Newham, Entrepreneurship Amongst Sierra Leone Refugees in the United Kingdom* and research commissioned by the Southwark Council to identify the needs of the Sierra Leonean Community groups in the London Borough.

His father, His Excellency Siaka Stevens, was Prime Minister and later President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, positions which he held from 1968 to 1985.

While in South Carolina, His Excellency will accompany SC State students and faculty to Penn Center, St. Helena Island to participate in their annual Heritage Days Festivities.

Also featured on Thursday is Joseph Opala, anthropologist and public historian and guest speaker in the *Journey Continues* series. He will present *“Priscilla’s Homecoming: A Gullah Woman Finds Her Roots in Sierra Leone”*. Professor Opala describes the research that linked Thomalind Martin Polite, a Gullah woman from South Carolina and graduate of SC State, to her family’s roots in the West African nation of Sierra Leone. Mrs. Polite is the direct descendant of a 10-year-old girl, named “Priscilla,” who was brought to Charleston on a slave ship in 1756. Opala and other scholars traced Polite’s family history. Their research led to “Priscilla’s Homecoming” in 2005 -- an historic visit by Polite to Sierra Leone where she was received by that country’s president as a long-lost relative who comes home. Sierra Leoneans believe that Polite brought back the spirit of the young girl taken away 250 years ago.



Opala is a lecturer at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He is a historian who lived in the West African nation of Sierra Leone for 17 years and is known for his research on the *“Gullah Connection,”* the long historical thread that links Africans in Sierra Leone and other countries on the “Rice Coast” of West Africa with the Gullah people of coastal South Carolina and Georgia.

Opala's research resulted in a visit by Sierra Leone's president to a Gullah community in 1988, and an historic "Homecoming" to Sierra Leone the following year by nine Gullahs from South Carolina and Georgia. These events were chronicled in "*Family Across the Sea*," an award-winning PBS documentary broadcast throughout the US in 1991.

Opala later made headlines with his research on an ancient African song preserved by a Gullah family in coastal Georgia. Opala and his colleagues found a village in Sierra Leone where the same song is still sung today and in 1997 brought the Georgia family to Africa for an unforgettable reunion. A documentary based on that remarkable story, called "*The Language You Cry In*," was released in 1998.

More recently, Opala found documents in the New-York Historical Society that helped link a Gullah woman living in Charleston, South Carolina with her great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, an enslaved African child taken from Sierra Leone in 1756. His research resulted in a "*Priscilla's Homecoming*" to Sierra Leone in 2005.

Opala's research has been covered by the New York Times, Washington Post, and Associated Press. He has appeared on CBS "60 Minutes" and CNN, and on NPR's "*The World*," "*Fresh Air*," and "*All Things Considered*," programs. In 1991, his research was featured on Channel 7 TV in Washington, DC in a week-long series called the "African American Connection."

Opala taught African Studies at the University of Sierra Leone from 1985 to 1991, and was an advisor to Sierra Leone's president on cultural policy. In recent years, he has acted as an advisor to the US National Park Service on African American history and as Scholar-in-Residence at Penn Center, St. Helena Island, South Carolina. In 2004 he was a research fellow at the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University. In 2005 he was a fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany.



Amadu Massally, special guest in the *Journey Continues* series, is a Sierra Leonean who resides in Dallas, TX. He is President of the Sierra Leone Network, a not-for-profit organization and co-founder of the Sierra Leone-Gullah Heritage Association, an organization that seeks to lead Sierra Leoneans to reconnect to their Sierra Leonean-American brothers and sisters who are descendants of slaves brought from Bunce Island primarily, and other areas of the country. He has co-sponsored the development of the Bunce Island exhibit, showcasing the historical connection Sierra Leone has with people in the US of African descent. The exhibit is currently on display in the Stanback as a part of the exhibition

Journey from Africa to Gullah. Amadu is also very involved with the Sierra Leonean Diaspora through the Council of Representatives (CORE), which seeks to serve as an umbrella representation for the Diaspora.

In addition to his professional duties, Amadu is currently planning a first of its kind Summit for DNA Sierra Leoneans in 2009 where African Americans who have been confirmed as having Sierra Leonean DNA will have an opportunity to network with other Sierra Leoneans and discuss opportunities to contribute to the country's future.

The Journey Continues series of lectures, workshops and performances, will proceed on **Thursday, December 4th at 5:30 p.m.**, with an Indigo workshop by Arianne King-Comer and a basket making workshop by Jerry Bennett Taylor.

The exhibition *Journey from Africa to Gullah*, presented in recognition of the 2008 Bicentennial of the end of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade will remain on display through January 12, 2009, accompanied by the planetarium show, *Decoding the Stars: Negro Spirituals and the Underground Railroad*, which can be viewed Tuesday's through Friday's at 4:00 p.m.

For additional information, contact the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium at **(803) 536-7174**.

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Renovated and reopened on February 23, 2007 after being closed for several years, the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium located on the campus of [South Carolina State University](http://www.scsu.edu) in [Orangeburg, S.C.](http://www.scsu.edu), is an embodiment of South Carolina State University's commitment to community service by enhancing the appreciation of both the Arts, Science and Humanities in a single facility. The Stanback's programs include aesthetic appreciation, historical and didactic information, scientific and technological presentations which encourage the development of critical thinking and creative skills for students and adult constituents. The Stanback is of significant national importance as the only facility of its kind, an interdisciplinary Museum and Planetarium, at any Historically Black College and University in this country.

Founded in 1896 as a land grant institution with a mission of providing service to the citizens of the state, [South Carolina State University](http://www.scsu.edu) has evolved from a small teachers' college into a major University center of learning and research. Located in [Orangeburg, S.C.](http://www.scsu.edu), with a student population of some 4,500, South Carolina State offers more than 50 different fields of study on the undergraduate and graduate levels. South Carolina State University is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and is a member of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States.