

Curator Extraordinaire

By Gloria Spann

*So Long,
So Far Away
Is Africa.*

Afro-American Fragment,
Langston Hughes

For the past fourteen years, Mr. Rufus Tiefing Stevenson, curator of Jah Kente International, Inc., has brought a portion of Africa to Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Since 1997 during Black History Month, he has graced our church with authentic and beautiful textiles gathered from his travels to the continent. He has managed, in a sense, to transport us to Africa, as we glance around the sanctuary and observe the beautifully draped textiles with their vibrant colors and images that conjure up life on the continent. With it comes a strong sense of pride in our people and the intricacy and craftsmanship of the textiles.

Mr. Stevenson has lived and traveled extensively in Africa, beginning with his first assignment as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Sierra Leone in 1962. He felt an immediate kinship with Africa and its people, and started amassing his collection of textiles and artifacts during subsequent trips as a State Department Diplomat to Mali, West Africa and Madagascar. He became immersed in the culture of the area, teaching English at one point while serving as a Consular Officer and working with the first televised drought in Mali as a Political Officer. He was touched by the conditions that he witnessed during the drought and began to reflect more and more on the nature and spirit of the people. In 1973, he was determined to "harness the moment" and to go wherever the spirit led him to expose others to the spirit, culture, art and textiles of the people on the African continent.

Mr. Stevenson has honored that commitment many times over. After returning to the United States, he established the Tiefing Collection (pronounced Che-fen) named for the West African Bambara people of Mali. The collection includes African art, carvings and handwoven textiles from throughout Africa to ancient Polynesia. The collection is housed at JAH Kente International, Inc. and is awe-inspiring. Mr. Stevenson speaks reverently and lovingly of the beautiful pieces and takes pride



in giving a tour of the collection, while providing a mesmerizing history of the continent and the meaning of the pieces. His passion is evident, and the collection continues to grow as a result of the pieces that he brings back from the group tours that he conducts to the motherland.

It is from this extensive collection that each year he plans and carefully selects the textiles that he uses to drape our sanctuary, transforming it into a beautiful and meaningful tribute to the ancestors. Although each year the arrangement is completely different, the elongated strips of colorful cloth that anchor the textiles represent the seven (7) voices of Africa from the biblical period to the present, that is, from Ethiopia to the establishment of the African Union (AU). The textiles represent many countries and range from the vibrant liberation colors (red, yellow, green) of the Kente cloth to the more subdued colors of the mud cloths, many displaying royal or cultural symbols. The textiles are fragile, and many are very valuable.

For a number of years, Mr. Stevenson has dressed several other churches in the area, including the New Hope Baptist Church, the Union Temple Baptist Church, and his very own church, Metro-

politan AME. The demand for his service has spread to other aspects of the community. For instance, he has dressed both the Millenium and Grand Concert Hall Stages at the Kennedy Center for twelve (12) consecutive years for the "Spirit of Kwanzaa Celebration," as well as the Lincoln Theater and the GALA Hispanic Theater for the Washington Dance Institute. He has also prepared textile displays for The Congressional Black Caucus.

Beyond the local community, Mr. Stevenson's textiles have been displayed at historic events in the Nation's Capital. He was given permission by Mrs. Coretta Scott King in 2003 to drape the podium on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for the 40th Anniversary of the March on Washington. In addition, he dressed the stage on the steps of the U.S. Capitol for Minister Farrakhan in 2005 for the 10th Anniversary of the Million-Man March.

Mr. Stevenson lovingly and tirelessly continues to fulfill his mission established so long ago--to spread the culture and spirituality of the African people. In so doing, he reminds us of our roots and the critical need to preserve this part of our history. The beautiful textiles are a magnificent tribute to the ancestors as well as a testament to his life-long dedication and devotion "to nurture and promote the cultural spirit of Africa in the Diaspora."

For further information or to request a tour, go to www.JahKente.org or email him at JahKente@aol.com. ❖