

**“Africa Must be Seen to be Believed:” African Americans and the Roots of
Heritage Tourism in the Age of Decolonization**

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In 1954, ten members of the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers (NAFAD), the premier organization for African Americans in the fashion industry, traveled to Europe at the urging of Madame Henri Bonnet, the wife of the French Ambassador to the United States. Bonnet met NAFAD’s leaders at their annual meeting in 1950 and was so impressed that she implored their newly elected president, Freddy Henderson, to bring a group of women to Europe to partake in the fashion and international trade shows occurring on the continent. The women flew to Paris on a Pan-American jet and then continued their journey throughout the continent visiting famed fashion houses and shows in Rome and London. While in Europe, Henderson served as a reporter for the Associated Negro Press, becoming the first African American to cover such important fashion events.

Henderson not only became a pioneer in fashion journalism on that trip, but as the primary organizer for NAFAD’s complex travel arrangements, she navigated what was un-chartered territory for most African Americans in the 1950s. Indeed, none of the women in the NAFAD delegation had ever traveled outside the United States, and at the time, no Black owned travel agencies existed that served

international destinations. Henderson returned from Europe so impressed with the ease of travel, the grandeur of continent's cultural destinations, and the lack of overt racial discrimination they encountered abroad, that upon her return she explained to her husband Jacob, "I think more black people would travel if they knew how easy it was." So in 1955, with no initial capital beyond their personal savings, and no prior experience in the travel industry, they opened the Henderson Travel Agency. Only the fifth black owned travel agency in existence at the time and the first one that booked international destinations exclusively.

The Henderson Travel Agency, still in existence today, is credited with sending over 50,000 African Americans around the globe. And while the European continent first excited Freddie Henderson, the agency's greatest success came in planning trips to West Africa. Scholarship and public imaginings that emphasize the origins of roots or heritage tourism in the late 1970s ignore the history and legacy of the Hendersons who sponsored leisure junkets to the continent as early as 1957. In my remarks I wish to examine the Henderson Travel Agency and those who traveled with them to highlight the complex, messy, and seemingly apolitical ways African Americans waged battles to be taken seriously not only as postwar American citizens, but consumers and cosmopolitans. For members of the emerging postwar black middle class, vacationing outside of the US provided a pleasurable escape from the indignities of Jim Crow segregation. Examining travel to newly independent nations on the African continent creates an even richer template upon which to discuss the contours and complexities of black global citizenship.