

Raising the Profile of Black Mathematicians

According to Professor Rosina Mamokgethi Setati-Phakeng, the first Black South African female to get a PhD in Mathematical Education

Being the first is not something to be proud about, it is a calling to ensure you are not the last.

My name is Dr Nira Chamberlain and I became the first Black Mathematician to be referenced in *Who's Who*, which is a leading source of biographical data on more than 33,000 influential and distinguished people from around the world. Published annually since 1849, I am only one of approximately 30 mathematicians referenced in the 2015 edition of this book. Inclusion has therefore come to carry a considerable level of prestige.

As well as this, according to the Science Council, I am one of the Top 100 Scientists in the UK, and one of only two Black Scientists to be recognised. The Science Council cites my development of mathematical modelling applications for industry as the reason for this honour. As a professional mathematician I have worked all over the UK and Europe for the past 20 years.

In September 2015, I was challenged to raise the profile of Black mathematicians during October's Black History Month. I wrote a PowerPoint presentation entitled *The Black Heroes of Mathematics* (<http://slideplayer.com/slide/7866109/>). This was well received by social media and most notably by the American Mathematical Society. As well as social media outreach, I wrote to a number of organisations who celebrated Black History Month. I would challenge them on how they represented and informed the general public about Black Scientists and Mathematicians. The organisation that responded the most positively was Black Cultural Archives which is based in Brixton, London. According to their website



Founded in 1981, Black Cultural Archives' mission is to collect, preserve and celebrate the heritage and history of Black people in Britain.

Black Cultural Archives opened the UK's first dedicated Black heritage centre in Brixton, London in July 2014. The new heritage centre will enable them to provide greater access to their archive collection, dedicated learning spaces and an exciting programme of exhibitions and events that explore British history from a unique perspective.

Black Cultural Archives' unparalleled and growing archive collection offers insight into the history of people of African and Caribbean descent in Britain. The bulk of the collection is drawn from the twentieth century to the present day, while some materials date as far back as the second century. The collection includes personal papers, organisational records, rare books, ephemera, photographs, and a small object collection.



... In September 2015, I was challenged to raise the profile of Black mathematicians during October's Black History Month. ...

Through a series of correspondence, Black Cultural Archives asked if I would be happy to submit my personal mathematical documentation to the archives. I readily agreed, however,

this was not going to be a straightforward task. Hence, I enlisted the help of the Institute, which exists to support the advancement of mathematical knowledge and is committed to promoting mathematics as a more diverse community. The IMA

Editorial Officer, Rebecca Waters, searched through ten years' worth of *Mathematics Today*, and eight articles were found including: *Proud to be a Mathematician*, my graduate profile and debate with a Radio DJ who stated mathematics is boring from the April 2005 issue and *The Gambler's Ruin and the Dawn of Probability*, a mathematical paper based on my PhD research from the August 2015 issue.

In addition to this, I submitted my original mathematics paper entitled *Long Multiplication and Percentages without a Calculator*, published by the Mathematics Association. This paper is based on a method I invented while teaching mathematics at an inner-city Saturday School in Birmingham. From this exercise, I hope to make a difference. Finally, I wish to share with all aspiring mathematicians, no matter their background, the advice my parents gave to me



You don't need anybody's permission to be a great mathematician!

Nira Chamberlain CMath CSci FIMA
Babcock International Group

A version of this article first appeared in the BCA Newsletter in March 2016.