



## **Chike Azuonye Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 - 2024**

My name is Chikezie Azuonye. I was born in a town called Okigwe in Eastern Nigeria, which is now in Imo State. I would describe my heritage as, firstly, a Nigerian, but having lived in the United Kingdom for a long time, I now describe myself as a British Citizen with Nigerian heritage.

### **Earliest memories**

My earliest memories are as far back as the early sixties. I remember vaguely that my father, who was the Chief Examiner of Accounts for the Eastern region at the time: an accountant, was auditing the books for the Eastern region until the Nigeria Biafra civil war in 1967. I was born in Okigwe, then we moved to Abakaliki, and from Abakaliki, we moved to Enugu. So, my recollection actually began from the time we were in Abakaliki. There, I was able to observe my other siblings and was copying them with some of the things they were doing in those days, like building cars and lorries using tree trunks, and all the different things they were constructing with just basic materials. We were trying to construct things like cars and trains. Those were my childhood memories. We didn't need toys because we were producing our own toys. We were doing those things that a lot of children these days may not have the opportunity to do. But we explored our childhood. It was an interesting childhood, which I enjoyed so much.

### **The effects of the war**

We moved to Enugu and my education continued there, until the war broke out in 1967. The fact is that the war in itself disrupted quite a lot of things, not just for me but for so many people. In the process of that war, I lost my education, and so, for three years, I did not go to school-from 1967 until, in fact 1970 when I went to school for the first time because of the war. We were always running for our lives and it was quite a difficult time. But in the midst of that war, my childhood memories continued. We ran from Enugu and went to my village. I am from Isuikwuato Local Government area in Abia State. So, when we arrived in my village, we met other children less privileged than us. However, eventually we became villagers ourselves because we then got initiated into the realities of the war. Suddenly, everything and all the nice things we had, were no

longer there because of the war. With time, we too became villagers. We started hunting wild animals and began learning survival tricks. I found that my sense of smell, my sense of touch became really developed, because we were taught how to use our sixth sense in order to cope with the realities of life in the village. So these are some of my memories I still remember. So the war, even though it was quite difficult, also brought with it its own knowledge, that I am still cherishing today.

### **Nurturing a passion for arts**

In terms of my vocation, art, which I would call my passion. I found myself drawing and painting even in the early seventies, when I was still in primary school. I remember winning the East Central State Festival of Arts competition then. I drew a cockerel, and perhaps if we go to the archives, my name might still be there. I don't know where to find it. But I remember I was the winner. And then I just kept painting and drawing, and especially, making portraits for people throughout my secondary school. After my secondary school, I worked at the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Enugu for a couple of years, and I also used portraiture to make extra money. So, I went to work in the morning, and I do portraits at night. And then, at some point, my family and friends and everybody urged me to continue my education in arts. I gained admission to University of Nigeria Nsukka, where I studied Fine and Applied Arts, majoring in Painting.

After my graduation from University of Nigeria Nsukka, I went to do my Youth Service in Enugu. But you know in Nsukka, we have one of the best schools in Nigeria. My BA Degree was five years, not three years as you would find in other universities all over the world, which allows you to cover other subjects like Anthropology, Archaeology, Poetry, French, German, Religion, and all sorts of external courses apart from your internal departmental courses. One thing that this system led to, was allowing you to choose two subjects, eventually, in your fourth year. I chose Painting and Graphic Design. So, I'm a Graphic Designer, I'm also a Painter. So, when I left Uni, I went to do my Youth Service in Enugu. After my Youth Service, I got a job with Reads and Mark Limited, an advertising agency, and the owner of that was the late Willy Nnorom. It was during one of my art exhibitions after my youth service, I think at the Nigeria Union of Journalists NUJ in Enugu, that I had an exhibition and Willy Nnorom came to that exhibition and bought one of my paintings and then offered me a job as a Graphic Designer.

I decided to leave the country, having done many an extensive work in Nigeria, extensive exhibitions in Lagos, I met very prominent people like General Aikhomu and all those people. I was able to leave Nigeria and came to the United Kingdom.

### **Life in the UK**

I've been in London for quite a long time now, for thirty something years nearly going to forty years. So I have been in this country in the UK exhibiting and pursuing my passion which I'm still doing today. My early years in the UK, I would say was not that traumatic in the sense that I had my older brother living here in the UK. I was in his house when I arrived. And you know when you come from Nigeria you come with this, 'I can do

everything attitude'. I jumped into the society, the British society with my work, my early works I did here, were all being chased by so many people, one of them being 'Milkmaid' and then 'Night Out' which a lot of people have bought through someone. Even though it did not go the way I expected. It was one of those mistakes people make in their business, to go into business with people you shouldn't go into business with. The works I'm talking about have been published. There was one 'Girl about Town' and so many other art works and some have been used in different forms. I was making a lot of impact. There was a lot of, I would say, the mainstream galleries were not used to my type of work. Then eventually I met with artists like Hassan Aliyu and Ademola Akintola and some other artists at that time. And they were going through the same process. The same difficulty of getting right into the British mainstream galleries and opportunities. I now understand the situation, if I had the same information I had now at that time, I would like to make some changes. But there is no point crying over spilt egg or whatever. You know spilt water or oil. The fact remains that looking back it was a struggle. I would say we were part of the pioneers that opened up Black British art in this country.

In term of my work and those of my colleagues, you know, where you are can influence your work in one way or the other. If you live in a certain country for some time, that country will also influence you at some point. I lived Kaduna in the northern Nigeria and saw milk maids, young girls, carrying milk called Fura da Nono, which they sell as a refreshing drink. I was also keen about symbols, and things that relate to Africa, especially Nigeria. So most of the themes and ideas and symbols and motifs that I use for my work, were all drawn from my culture, in Nigeria, which I think did not sit with the British community at the time. They would look at it and tell me it was beautiful but would not buy it. Even though I started selling my paintings later, when people began to appreciate it, I would find that these collectors were more from the continent, like Finland, Italy and so on than the UK. However, I have sold quite a lot in this country since then, but the point I am making is that it is always, and very difficult, to enter into the mainstream galleries that would give you the opportunity as an artist. I can only imagine that the subject matter would be the issue, because of the mood and style of painting. I was trained as a traditional painter. We were taught the western type of painting: how to paint, how to mix colours, achieving balance. All those elements you find in my paintings are not different to what you would find in the works of Western art masters. So, I could only relate the reason to either my education or the subject matter. That sets the scene for the reason why Hassan Aliyu and myself and other Nigerian artist decided to set up Nigeria Art Society UK NASUK, which is still very much alive and kicking as we speak.

### **The Nigeria Art Society UK**

The society, Nigeria Art Society UK which is called in abbreviation NASUK, was set up to embrace artists drawn from different parts of Nigeria, which I would call One Nigeria. To be honest with you, we are drawn from different parts of Nigeria, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Rivers State and everywhere. The whole idea was to establish ourselves; these are all very fine artists, beautifully, talented, and hardworking artists of Nigerian descent living in the diaspora to be able to have the opportunity to exhibit in mainstream

galleries. To give ourselves access where access had not been given to us previously. To create our own reality, to be able to open the doors for ourselves. That was the reason why we created the Nigerian Art Society UK. The highlight of our series of exhibitions was the one we had at Brunei Gallery at SOAS, which attracted over 10,000 people on the theme of 'Legacies of Biafra', which talked about the Nigeria Biafran civil war and its legacies, and which related to my childhood days. And that exhibition toured to Gallery Oldham near Manchester, where it ran for a few months. The exhibition will eventually be touring Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth, Germany. Hassan, Dr Louisa Egbunike (Curator of the exhibition) and I visited Germany recently, for the second time to finalise and look at the spaces, and also to look at their art collection on the civil war, which we hope to add to the existing works. We don't know when and where the tour is going to end. I know that after Germany in 2025, it will come back to London at the Africa Centre in 2026. So we hope to take it to America, then to take it to Nigeria, eventually. But we need a situation where we have the freedom to exhibit the work in Nigeria, to be able to talk about the work and not have the authorities stepping in, as if we are doing something wrong. We are only artists, expressing our thoughts and just talking about the war. The exhibition is not about cessation. It is about recollections of the war, because you need to look at your past in order to make your future a better place to be. You can't just sweep everything under the carpet and think it's going to go away. So that's what we are trying to do as artists. We are not politicians; we are only artists trying to explore our history. The art collective is drawn from different parts of Nigeria (Yoruba, Igbo, Auchi etc.) and responding to the topic of Nigeria Biafra civil war legacies and exploring the history. This is our history. That is why the Legacies of Biafra is a very important exhibition and the Nigerian Art Society UK is doing its best to ensure that the voices of Nigerian artists or artists of African descent are heard in this country.

### **Giving gratitude for both identities.**

Regarding my family and home life and identity in the UK. I would think that I am someone who gives gratitude where gratitude is due. I would say that I have benefitted quite a lot from being a British citizen and also living in London. And I happened to live right in the middle of the city where we have, just next to us, the Tate Modern, Globe Theatre, which is very close, the Old Vic and the Young Vic Theatre, and also living right next to the River Thames. So, it is a wonderful opportunity, and one that I would be ever grateful for living in such a wonderful place, and having such a wonderful family, children and wife. They bring everything together. They make everything meaningful to me. Without them nothing would make any sense. So, I would say that I have my feet on both places, actually two places, Nigeria and the UK. Nigeria will always be my home. The UK is my home as well. I have lived here more than I have lived in Nigeria, in terms of years. Also, I have been blessed in both places. So, I have to love and appreciate what the two communities have given to me. When I reflect on Nigeria, I know that even in the midst of difficulties, you see that people are still smiling, people are still joking. It gives me huge, and immense joy to know that I come from such a giving society. I know that things are difficult at the moment, but we pray that Nigeria will succeed and eventually everybody will have smiles on their faces and whatever is bringing this misery will come to pass. Already, I can say that there are a number of exchanges between the British people and Nigeria in terms of art. I know that people

like Yinka Shonibare have established an exchange programme with the studio he's building in Lagos and other projects like that. So there is a lot of scope. Can you imagine if one or two other people were doing this, in addition to what Yinka Shonibare is already doing? There would be opportunities of working with our Nigerian counterparts. And the Nigeria Art Society UK are also beginning to merge our work with our Nigerian counterparts. We are trying to see how we can come together and create some kind of exchange programme, and also have exhibitions together and work together. These are some of the things in the pipeline. And as you know, and as we know, the so called the Black arts, is actually happening at this moment. We have the 154 exhibition in London every October, and elsewhere, and many exhibitions taking place in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the leading art destinations in the world. So, we should be part of both. So, I am happy that I am a Nigerian and I am British citizen too, so I can share my gift in both countries and with diverse people.