



Dr Ekua Agha Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 – 2024

00:00:01 Tholani Alli

Okay so thank you. Welcome today everyone to another interview. My name is Tholani and today we have Dr. Ekua. Dr. Ekua please tell us a little bit about yourself and what it is that you are up to these days.

00:00:16 Dr Ekua Agha

Right thank you so much Tholani for that introduction. Yes my name is Dr. Ekua Agha. Well, everyone just calls me Ekua. I was born in London to parents of Nigerian and Guinean heritage, hence the name Ekua. So, and actually another middle name that was given to me by my mother. So, she named, doubly named me Ekua Andrea, which was after my Brazilian grandmother Andresa, but because of the British presence, apparently, people started emphasizing their name, so Andresa became Andrea. Anyway, but I go by Ekua Andrea Agha. Born in London. My parents returned to Nigeria just after the Civil War broke out, because at that time Nigeria had been gained independence from Britain, so a lot of Nigerians would come to study in the UK were encouraged to go back to go and rebuild the nation.

So, I was born at a very interesting time, well I returned to Nigeria and was raised in what is to be called the former Western state of Nigeria, Ibadan. And the reason why I say Ibadan because Ibadan was the capital of the western state. It was also where the British administration had also settled after Lagos. And the first university in Nigeria was set up there. So, the University of Ibadan was the first in Africa. We also had the Western Nigerian television station, WNTV, which had the first, which was the first TV station in Africa as well. So, you can imagine that everybody was in Ibadan. So, going to school in Ibadan was very exciting at that time. I went to a primary school run by Irish Catholic nuns, Maryhill Convent School. And I think this is where we, I'm going to start talking about my British experience, culture, because, you know, at that time, Nigeria was probably just only 10 years of post-British independence. So, things are not just going to change overnight. The curriculum was still the same. So, everything that it might be, we took it for granted that, you know, whatever we were learning in or studying at primary school was just local to us, not realizing that it was actually based on what we call a solid British curriculum.

So, my first experience of any kind of culture, literature, you know, music, arts, because I mean, the schools were very much sort of, there was a great emphasis on

the liberal arts as well. We had maths and English, but there was so much in reading, drama, history. And so, you know, very exciting times at that time. So, this is where I immersed myself with friends, you know, going to the Arts Theatre at University of Ibadan, because that's where all the plays. So, the University of Ibadan, we didn't realise that it was actually PhD the students who had to dramatize their plays because that was their final thesis. They had to write a play and stage it. Yeah, because that was, so my mother's very close friend was a lecturer at the University of Ibadan.

The late Professor Zulu Sofola was my mother's very close friend. And my mother was a drama teacher at secondary school. So, she would get my mother to come and collaborate on her plays and would get the, her students, my mother's students at the secondary school to also take part in the plays. So, it meant that my mother would have to go and supervise, you know, the experts, you know, who had acting, you know, roles as well. And there would be in the theatre all day because there was all the rehearsals and the cuts and the sort of lighting and all everything. And because they would have to stage the play for probably four days or even a whole week depending on the run. So my sisters and I spent a lot of time at the arts theatre at the back just watching my mother we couldn't obviously interrupt because we were just there to just sit there and just kind of watch my mother in her element in her elements with or you know working with Auntie Zulu and the only time we got excited was the day of the play when the play was now finally being staged you know and you sit there and you see the whole thing run through and you think oh my God I will remember this part and all of that.

Anyway so um that's kind of like giving you a background to this you know my life I was very much interested in history based on my own mother's culture because Lagos we spent a lot of time in Lagos because my grandmother my mother's mother lived in Lagos so over the weekends the long holidays I remember going between Lagos and Ibadan, I still do that up to now, but I remember just kind of so listening to all the stories, you know, of the colonial times in Nigeria, the great buildings around the marina, and so that was kind of things that were in my consciousness.

So, I think, you know, because looking back, I wound up doing a lot of reading and went of course with education you had to start thinking about GCSE exams and you know what you were really going to do in life and I just remembered that I just couldn't really kind of like thinking of what I wanted to do because still with a lot of Nigerian families, the choice of career was always law, medicine, engineering, and I kind of like looked at myself and I thought I just really did not fit into any of that. I didn't want to be a lawyer because, you know, everybody else was going to be a lawyer and I just thought, why would I really want to do that?

So, I remember a best friend, one of my best friends in secondary school, and I sat, I was still in Nigeria, and we sat at lunchtime, and she was part German. So, she already had German as a first language, because over the holidays, her mother would take her to Germany, and she would go to, because the German schools didn't break up until much later. So, when she was on holiday in Nigeria, the schools were still on holiday so her mother would have to send her to school for maybe a summer school or something but whatever the point was she would she had German and so we sat one day I think we just thought oh my God what are we going to do with our lives you know everybody was going in to do medicine you know they're all

going to do law and they already kind of had all these ideas of what they were going to do and my friend and I were completely hopeless. So, we decided, well, okay, we're going to have to just go and go to the French class. Nobody else. They had French on the curriculum. And I think it was one of those classes that people just would avoid. Or when the French teacher came in, that was when people wanted to go to the toilet.

00:08:57 **Tholani Alli**

Wow

00:08:57 **Dr Ekua Agha**

This was when they were ill, or, you know, it was a great disruption. And I think I just thought, well, if people are not doing that, then it just means that we should be doing it, you know, because at least that way we're not with the masses, you know. And then it was, and I think it started off that way because we already had, you know, a lot of access to French at home. So, I don't want to complicate more matters over here in terms of my...., so I'm going to leave it that way. But I already had French spoken at home. My aunt was married, was married to a Malian from Mali, Bamako, and she worked at the United Nations in Geneva. Okay. And she was also my godmother. Okay. Exactly. So, I spent a lot of my time in Geneva with my first cousins who had French as a language based on their Francophone father and also living in Geneva. Okay. So coming to school and hearing the French teacher teaching our basic French for me was just a laugh because,.. but I took it seriously because I knew that the basis of grammar was that was going to be very important like the English language if you don't have the grammar there's no way you can obviously start speaking or conjugating verbs and making because I mean part of the exams at translation you have to do literature like you were doing English literature so it's not just about spoken about the written. So, I started taking French seriously, and I realized that actually I was good with languages.

So, I thought, great, that's just going to be like something I'm going to have to focus on and do well, because if I don't do it properly, I can't add to save my life. It means that forget the accounting jobs, forget anything else, you know, I'm going to have to do this. And I also had English literature and history. So those were my areas of focus. Yes, it was difficult at that time in the 80s to kind of even see where that was going to go. And not even nobody could sit me down and say, oh, you know, you could actually go in and do, you know, a teaching degree and then go on to do a master's and, you know, go into academia, you know, and actually do research. So, I was just kind of. I just did it. My A -levels, by that time, I was at school in England, went to a boarding school in Oxford, and that was also quite interesting because, you know, you're right in the middle of Oxford. We were doing Tudor history back again, you know, to look at the Oxford Colleges and the architecture in Oxford. So, you're really right in the middle of medieval country, you know, you're sort of like in a time warp. And so that was very interesting times as well where I took A -level literature, English and History, but I still could not decide what I wanted to study at university and that was a big, major, major issue for me at that time, you know, I struggled and I think that was my decision to, I spoke to my parents because that was, you know, I, everybody was doing pharmacy, you know, I mean, they knew what they were doing and I didn't know what I was doing and I just felt like I was not really being, you know, true to myself, you know, I just felt that I was wasting my time, you know, with all the subjects, but I didn't want to do anything else. Anyway,

so I decided that, you know, instead of wasting time in the UK, I probably had to go back to Nigeria and, you know, I wanted to go back to Nigeria and just go to university of Lagos and study French and just get on with my life. At least I'll be close to home because there wasn't anything here for me in terms of like, I go into university. So, fortunately, we also had a lot of friends leaving England to go to the United States in the 80s. The American presence in Nigeria was now becoming quite apparent, and you had the United States Information Service, USIS, and it had big, massive, like the British Council, you know, where you could go in and get, they had a lot of library, so you could go into the USIS library. And half of it was brochures about American University and options, you know, they weren't kind of, it was subtle. You know.

00:14:08 Tholani Alli

It's subtle diplomacy.

00:14:09 Dr Ekua Agha

Yeah, exactly. And how to get into an American university. and I just remembered my father's very close friend, he's, he was actually the landlord to the USIS. Yeah. Building. The building. I'll get to the building. So, I had the time, I'd taken the year out, went in there and I just sat through the compendium and set it right into American universities, applying. Wow. And because then I realized that with the US., you could actually do a lot of combination. You know, you just didn't have to do the foreign language. You could do history. You could do, you know, it was more like a liberal art or what we call multidisciplinary. And that meant that I could still retain the French. I could still retain the, all the subjects I loved, you know. And, yeah, so that's how I wound up going to Louisiana State University. I got accepted to LSU, Baton Rouge, which ironically was also a French, former French colony. It was one of the French, the French had purchased Louisiana and sold it back to the United States. So, it used to be a former off the coast of the United States. Right.

00:15:37 Tholani Alli

Sorry, it's just LSU stands for?

00:15:40 Dr Ekua Agha

Louisiana State University. In the capital, Baton Rouge, but you must probably have heard of New Orleans. New Orleans, yes. So, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, it's a French, very heavy French culture in Louisiana, which still remains till today. Wow. French African with the Creoles, because that's anyway. So that's the home of jazz. So, we happened just to be there, and immersed in this amazing culture, while studying as well. So, it was a real bonus, you know, at that time, just doing my first degree in political science and French. Then I thought, yeah, I'm off to the UN, because then I thought this is me now becoming Nigerian, and Nigeria's ambassador to the United Nations. That was my ideal role.

00:16:33 Tholani Alli

At the time...

00:16:34 Dr Ekua Agha

You know, having French as well and being influenced by my godmother who lived in Geneva. And so, we knew a lot of ambassadors. They're all sort of the Nigerian ambassador to Switzerland or those who worked in the United Nations. So, we're all

very close friends. And so, when I was on holiday, so, you know, you get, you kind of like, she was a role model for me, anyway. And so, I kind of embarked on doing a lot of work with politics in school. But I had taken American foreign policy, which was one of my modules, you know, because that was very important for me because that was foreign policy towards Africa or actually US relations. And to my dismay, you know, I sat in the foreign policy class. It was a whole term, you know, so you start with the one module with American foreign policy towards North America, of course, there's other neighbours like Canada, you know, and then South America, and then Europe, and then Asia, they've had the Middle East. And I'm sitting there, when is Africa coming?

Because I was going to be excited because, you know, this is where I would now sort of have, you know, get the information to probably build on, to probably go do a master's, because, you know, for you to be able to kind of even want to write anything, you come from a BA, kind of, you know, and then you build it up onto, and there really wasn't any foreign policy. And that's where I thought we are the second, outside of the United States, you know, the second, the biggest black population, you know, is in the United States. And we don't even have any kind of cultural or, it was more of economics and trade. And that's not, I'm not an economist, you know, my work is on culture, I began to see that I really was looking at how do we interact, you know, with the history and align those histories together, so that at least there's a cross conversation between, you know, African-Americans who are searching, you know, trying to return home, but at least have a cultural aspect to it, and then encourage that tourism.

I mean, that's where I was going, I'd lived in Louisiana, I would see the whole culture that was brought from Africa. This is even way before I was interested in Brazil, but already seen the African culture in New Orleans, you know, with jazz music that actually started from the African music. You know, when the African slaves, enslaved had come to Louisiana, they brought also with them even the food that was brought along. I think it was a mixture of the, you know, of the, of the food that they also kind of had to change because, you know, dilute because lack of ingredients and they obviously had to modify, I would say, to the local culture. But the base, so culture, music, food, and all that. You could see what's from, coming from Africa. And those are the things that I was interested in and trying to promote.

But and you remember, we didn't even really have the internet then, so it's difficult to kind of like have a snapshot of this. Like, you know, people put us in a line now, and that. So, yeah. So, but I just kind of thought, well, I'm just going to change gears. I'm not going into political science. international relations is not going to be the agenda, if Africa is not going to be kind of part of that conversation, I do not want to be part of it, you know, because we have a lot, we've had a lot and still have a lot to contribute to the world's culture and in terms of relations, you know, in socio-cultural, you know, and once you do that, the economics come into play, because then you're going to be trading, you're going to be having cross-cultural conversations as well. But I still kept my passion for it, still not knowing what to do with it, you know, at that time. At somewhere along the line.

So, I just went to work for public PR, American Telephone and Telegraph Company in New York, because they, At that time, the technology age was coming up and AT&T was at the front of the technology. They were trying, this is where they were

trying to build the information superhighway that we have now. And AT&T had a big museum of science and technology where they were inviting school groups and business groups to come and see prototypes of what would see the future of technology. So all what we're talking about now the video, phones and all this were actually at the AT&T Museum and my job with some of my colleagues was taking people around.

So I left the public, the international relations part bit out and went to work for public relations and still promoting because then what was the AT&T also had corporate responsibility, so they were sponsoring big shows in New York, like museums especially, so and promoting sort of, cultural organizations. So, BET, Black Entertainment, television, if there was a big documentary, AT&T would sponsor. And so, we, those of us who were affiliated with the African, African culture or African American culture would be sent to represent AT&T at those openings, you know. So, I got to go around museums, the studio museum in Harlem, if there was a big exhibition. Exhibition, yeah. Yeah, and AT&T would sponsor the exhibition, like, you know, take more than, you know, you've got, I think it's Mitsubishi, a big company that sponsors a lot of the exhibitions. So, AT&T had that responsibility.

So we, my colleagues and I would be there at the opening nights, you know, working. Yeah, we still got to, but we were promoting AT&T's agenda for telecoms and obviously advertising and you know using the products as well which as we can see now you know it's now the it's now the norm but at that time AT&T was building up business partners. Yeah. And that was where it was interesting to see how it's now all panned out. Anyway, but that was in the 90s. I stayed in New York, you know, did a lot of work on PR and still not knowing. I came out with a first degree in political science, but people would say, oh, so what do you do? And I say, oh, PR, are you a lawyer? No, I'm not. So as a political scientist, oh, you're a politician. No, I'm not. So, I was still like jack of all trades, master of none. So not sort of like having what I call a clear profession in the liberal arts, it's quite difficult, but it's interesting because you could stay in the liberal arts and manoeuvre your way around. Well, I had my son, and then decided to return back to academia. I mean, you know, by that time, new areas in sort of like in the English and French departments were now opening up because people were now questioning the whole idea of the dominance of the English literature. and say, what about commonwealth literature? What is that?

00:25:48 Tholani Alli

And where were you at this time, when the questioning was taking place? You're still in New York?

00:25:53 Dr Ekua Agha

Well, I wasn't part of it, because I was not in academia at that time, but I had friends in academia who were beginning to look at this kind of work, because they were questioning the whole idea of where does Wole Soyinka, who had won the Nobel Prize for literature, where does he fit in, you know, in the, in the academy, you know, because, you know, we, Britain had, or France, had had interest in those areas as well. And the colonial issues that are coming up of the post-colony, you know, what is the post-colonial, you know, what's going on here, where we're looking at writers, the writers are writing in English, but they're writing in a particular way, challenging the dominance, you know, and obviously in also using ways, like all kinds of ways of also reintroducing cultures that have been put on the side.

So, we see a wave of writers and academics now calling for post-colonial studies, either in French or English, which was not in existence when I was at school, because that was never actually something people talked about. So, you had Asian, you know, you also had the Asian, the Indian writers who were, so it's all the countries, all the areas and continents that had been colonized by France and England, the dominant ones. The writers coming out of there had started questioning and challenging, so this is where you get the Ngugi wa Thiong 'o decolonizing the mind to say, well, if we're going to move on as Africans, we need to find a way of, yes, we accept the English dominance, but what is happening with the local culture? You know, how are we going to move on as a people?

So the writing, the kind of political, cultural, but they need it to be addressed within a particular audience as well, because people started studying them, like let's look at this, you know, and of course you cannot do the cologne, you cannot do the literature without having background of history, because this were written within a context, and what, I mean, what ways were these writers writing, you know, to kind of obviously draw attention, so different styles, you know, different writers coming up with either satire or comedy or didactic and all that. So I was, you know, when I, so, okay, now this is where I get excited. I just remembered a colleague or a friend who I was forever regretful to, you know, was academic and said to me, well, you already have French and English literature, BA, because it was politics and French. Yeah. You know, why don't you apply, look for universities in the UK that actually are offering post-colonial studies.

00:29:17 **Tholani Alli** Okay.

00:29:18 **Dr Ekua Agha**

I never heard of post-colonial studies as a subject. Okay. And he said, well, if you look within the French or English departments, you will probably find somebody who is a post-colonial reader. All right. Yeah. you