



Dr Ekua Agha Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 – 2024 (Part 2)

00:00:01 **Tholani Alli**

Okay, hello, Dr. Ekua, thank you for a part two. So, let's continue where we left off. So we are now talking about your intrigue for the post-colonial studies, and you're leaving the US and you're now venturing to the UK. Tell us what year this is and continue with your journey:

00:00:17 **Dr Ekua Agha**

Yes, so I returned to the UK., 2000 or 2001, roughly after, I know it was after the millennium, shortly, because I came back to London, and I just was fascinated by the Jubilee line being extended into Canary Wharf. And this is where we had the new, yeah, Canary Wharf. We had Westminster. We had all these new buildings. We had the Millennium Dome. So, it was great to be back in London when all this new, this sort of like interesting change. So, I was a bit reluctant to call universities up and say, do you do post-colonial studies? That was probably taken up more in the US. I wasn't sure what the US and UK was doing. So, I called up.

00:01:11 **Tholani Alli**

So, it's still a very niche, very small subject matter here.

00:01:14 **Dr Ekua Agha**

It is very niche, yeah, because it's within departments. It's within either French or even Portuguese. Some, because the Portuguese is Lusophone, Lusophone studies. So, because you also had Portuguese colonies in Angola, you had writers who were Guinea-Bissauan, and so there were a lot of people who were also challenging the dominance. So, I can't remember how I called up University of Westminster, and the French School of Languages, and they said, well, yes, send your transcripts from Louisiana State. And I got, I got her letter saying, yes, it is fine. And I was just so excited because we got the reading list and it's actually, it was an MA, two years part-time through reading and research.

00:02:18 **Tholani Alli**

Which was right, that fit in with your particular interest studies, work-life balance and your expertise.

00:02:26 Dr Ekua Agha

Well, I mean, I couldn't really work because it was two years of writing and reading because we were just sort of like actually going off for research, for research work. So that way we had done the bulk of the writing. I mean, I didn't realize until I started writing my PhD because all the stuff that I'd actually studied, all the material that I'd sort of studied working on, on the masters, now informed part of my doctoral thesis as well. Yeah, because there was so much on Senegal, because I started working on Francophone West Africa, looking at post-independence, that was for my MA in French and Francophone studies, and focusing on Senegal as my research area, even though at the beginning we were looking at all the different areas that France had colonized.

So, we've had the French Caribbean, Martinique, and also had what they called the Maghreb, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. And then you had West Africa, French West Africa, which was Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo. So that was another area. And then you also had Equatorial, I think Equatorial France, sorry, French Equatorial, which was Brazzaville. So, we had to look at all of those countries in general because we're all part of French territories. But then it came to a point where when we studied, we were asked to focus on a research area. I wanted to be closer to home. And I'd also been to Senegal with my parents on holiday when we were growing up in Nigeria. So, I always had a love for Dakar. And for me, I felt that I could sit in this, write about the French presence in Senegal and up to independence, the education and the imposition of French, where the French West Africans actually think of themselves as France, as French

You know, I mean that is French first, but then with research you understood that it was this cultural assimilation, you know, they'd had centuries and centuries of contact with France, that France actually saw Senegal as an extension of Dakar and of France as an extension of France. So, if you were living in Senegal in 1830s or early 1920s, whatever laws was going on in France applied to Senegal. Like they had the same rights. And this was, for me, very fascinating that French West Africans were already having that kind of conversation.

So, you can imagine the cultural ties. For them, they were part of the French, bigger French culture, which was not the same as, you know, those of us coming from West Africa, from Nigeria, from the English-speaking countries. I mean, we were still, it was more of an indirect world. So, for me, that was really fascinating. And I thought this is interesting because if we needed to really see what West Africa looks like in its entirety, the knowledge of Anglophone and the Francophone put together helps to understand why maybe different countries act differently. How do we now work together economically or culturally? Because if one part of our African brothers and sisters are thinking French, they're French, and we're thinking African, how do we get the cultures together? So very interesting way of doing that. But somewhere along the lines, I was a bit interested in resistance theory because looking at the American because then we're looking at the issue of slavery. That's where the slave, I said, you can't really do post-colonial without bringing up the slaves, the stories of the enslaved Africans.

And you also had a lot of the African writers in and having lived in the US understanding resistance to the slave trade. And the politics of the African Americans, you know, also searching for that identity and I kind of wanted to start looking at who the writers in French West Africa were, who were also clamouring for,

you know, a sort of African culture. Yeah. And I came across Africa's first filmmaker, Ousmane Sembene, who was working on challenging what we call dominance, that negative misrepresentation of Africans, you know, the caricatures and sort of finding a way of gaining awareness of a culture.

Tholani Alli

And just remind us, sorry, Ousmane Sembene, where is he from, which country is he from?

Dr Ekuia Agha

From Senegal.

00:08:33 Tholani Alli

And you met him, so approximately what time, what year approximately are we talking about?

00:08:38 Dr Ekuia Agha

Well, I started reading about him because when I started looking at resistance to, because as a political scientist, there was still the politics that was coming into my work, looking at resistance to colonial rule, because there were people who were fighting for Africans' independence. And the writers from the African Writers' Series were obviously at the forefront of the resistance to either French or English rule. And this is all done through literature, but it was interesting that somebody now decided that they were going to do it through film. Right. And so I thought that was a very interesting way because looking at the power of images as well and how that was also being able to spread to a lot of people compared to like when you're reading, because one of the issues with the reading was a lot of the Africans who were actually the masses of Africans were still not able to read French or English at that time because the colonial rule was only limited to like an elite group of people. And so Ousmane Sembène decided that one of the best ways of spreading in the African promoting culture was using cinema.

And this is where I decided that I would include that in my own work because I'm looking at somebody who's a writer and also deciding that he was going to use film. Knowing how Professor Wole Soyinka had used theatre as a way. You remember growing up in Nigeria, you know, we had theatre. Theatre was a way of communicating to a group, you know, to people as well. These were writers who would translate their work into, onto the stage. Messages were also sent and you're also enacting a culture as well. So, it was kind of, oh, cinema. I will sort of focus on this writer who was quite consistent. He didn't give up film for, he didn't give up literature for film because he was writing and adapting some of his work. So, when I finished my master's, I already started looking at Ousmane Sembène and knowing that I hadn't addressed his work in my MA thesis because that was not the subject of my MA thesis, but Senegal as a whole.

So I thought, well, that would be part, that would be what I would actually decide to write as work on and focus on, on my PhD thesis, Usman's work on promoting African culture that had been misrepresented and also by the colonial, because that was the agenda of colonial, so looking at post-colonial Senegal or Africa, how are we now going to bring back our own identity as well as a people? What were the stories, the stories that were suppressed, that people had not been speaking about? Who were the players, the characters, know, and also the issue of gender, which played a

lot as well. Women's rights at that time, who were the people giving education, you know, and there's a lot of, you know, there was a lot to unpack. And I had to look at Sembene's work because he, every book, every novel told a story. So, I had to kind look at how I was going to address each story or each issue across five chapters. Okay. Yeah, and I found that towards the end he started looking at women's rights. So, the female protagonists, you know, in his films, towards the end he said making films as the women were actually at the forefront.

00:13:18 Tholani Alli

And these are, just to film, these are women in Senegal, or is he talking about women all over Africa in general?

00:13:24 Dr Ekua Agha

Well, I mean, what he did was that he used Senegal as his template when they were speaking for African women. Actually, the last film, 'Moolaade', where he was talking about or actually looking at the issue of female circumcision, was a big issue, was set in Bamako, in Mali, but that was the only film that he did not make in Senegal. But everything else was made in Senegal. Talking about Moolaade, Moolaade, I included that because the last chapter of my thesis was all Ousemane Sembene's work on women. Because I thought once I'm done, once I'm finished with the thesis, I would start looking at women's writing. Because people told me and they said, well, you know, you're writing on Africa's first filmmaker, how come you're not looking at women's issues? And I said, well, let's understand the history of colonial West Africa, that men were the writers. Women's writing came secondly. What were the men writing about? Because when to understand what the women were writing about, they were challenging what the male patriarchal system was doing. Even though the male writers were writing, they were still writing in the sort of, you know, in the same, in the circumference of the, how they were taught, yeah. Because they still had access to education. Yeah. Because they were educated in the French schools, even the African, the African-speaking, Anglophone writers. Yeah. And so, women's issues were still spoken by men. And some of them were not very sensitive to the woman's writing. And, you know, that's what they knew. So, when Sembene's said it, writing, and people looked at his book, and the book, you might know it, because it has been translated into English, God's Bits of Wood.

00:15:36 Tholani Alli

I've heard of it. Yeah.

00:15:37 Dr Ekua Agha

Yeah. Yeah, Le Bout de Bois de Dieu was translated, and it was all about this, you know, women were at the forefront. I mean, they had, there was the sort of based on the crew's story. But anyway, the long and short of it was that when this book was written and people started reading about Sembene and realized that he'd actually puts female characters at the centre, and normally they would be on the edge. And they sort of take an interest in his work as one of the first African writers to give voice to women. So, it was interesting to sort of start looking at Sembene's work in that way. And so, I decided that that would be the last chapter so that if I was going to continue with anything else, you know, I can start looking at women's work because he'd given me like a template to work on. Right. In that sense, Sembene, Moolaade was his last film. And that was in 2000. And I don't want to say 2004.

00:16:59 **Tholani Alli**
2004.

00:17:01 **Dr Ekua Agha**
2004. Thank very much. And he came to London to promote Moolaade,

00:17:08 **Dr Ekua Agha**
Because that was at the African Film Festival. And usually, the film that wins the prize would open the festival, and the runner-up will close the festival. And I was at that point doing my research, and I remember my PhD supervisor was saying, even if you go, because I was like, oh, my God, Sembene's coming to London. You know, I was so excited. I said, I know I'm not, I mean, I'm not going to start writing to say, can I interview him? Because that was not even going to be, you know, possible. But I just thought at least I would go and watch the screening and bought my ticket at the Royal, at the British Film Institute. And even if I was in the audience, hearing him being interviewed because they had a screening and then he was interviewed after by the Guardian, it was a Guardian series.

And so went to the Royal and the place was packed because we had a lot of women's groups, especially because of the subject matter. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Had all come and, but I wasn't, I was there as a researcher, you know, walking on Sunden. And I thought, oh my God, there's so many people walking on Ousmane Sembene. And they're like, oh no, we're only here for, but you know, it was nice to know that there was a mixture of people who had come just to watch Moolade and I watched the, you know, we sat, watched the film, and as normally, I'm used to going to conferences or listening to African, you know, big speakers coming from, like, you know, from England, or, you know, I mean, everywhere, and, you know, very, and when they finish, they, out of there, to the back door, but nobody's expecting that they're going to be hanging around. So, nobody also expects that you're going to be going there to have a handshake, or even though you want to do it, but it's just not possible. So, that was what I thought was going to happen.

So, as we were leaving the cinema, Sembene had stood by the door, and quietly waiting to talk to people. And so, I walked past him, and I saw that he wasn't moving, you know, normally. And I so stopped to speak to him, and I said, oh, you know, I'm actually writing about you. He said, why would you want to do that? So that's just to show you how sort of unaware of his gift he was. Yeah. And for me, it's that was, for me, it was a great sense of pride that I'd actually met him, because, you know, writing about a really big figure, and it's always in abstract, but having sort of met him personally, well, in that way. And so that was it. He was given the Honorary Fellow of the Royal British Film Institute, yeah. And so, I mean, he'd won lots of prizes in that. Last year was actually his 100 years. He would have been 100 years. So there was a big - Celebration memory thing. Retrospective. Retrospective, yeah. At the BFI. So, it was just amazing, you know, to go and be a Sembène scholar and talk about Sembène. People, there were talks at the BFI on African film.

00:21:13 **Tholani Alli**
Wow.

00:21:13 **Dr Ekua Agha**
Not many people, obviously, had.. remembered him or.. or had great knowledge of Sembène's work, so I had a lot of input on that, based on, well, I'd spent so many

years in and out of working on his work, so that was a great pleasure, it was a great privilege, you know, to have been involved and invited to hear the talk. When I give conferences and talks abroad, we had the European Conference on African Studies last year at the University of Cologne in Germany. So, I sent off a paper for ECAS because it was called Afrofuturism. Because now, what is going on now is really looking at how filmmakers, you know, are using film as a way of projecting Africa's future.

You know, people are now looking at, you know, especially younger generation, you know, using comic books, heroes, Pop art, you know, even with art is so now it's kind of like, right, especially, and I think it was after Wakanda, you know, had come out and that Africa is not, is now becoming always, but I only say what we never take notice of, you know, there's always been research done and it's always been this amazing culture that when people tap into, we get excited about it, and I'm thinking, yeah, but this is our culture, you know, this is what we've always been talking about. So, Afrofuturism is now becoming part of academic talk, looking at, and especially with the African Americans as well, and how they use writers, you know, of the, and filmmakers as well, you know, use their work as a way of projecting the past to talk about the present, and then going into the future because they're all interconnected as well. ...

00:23:38 Tholani Alli

I was gonna say, so I just was just conscious of time. So just, I was wanting to ask you very quickly what led to the formation of the Nigerian-Brazilian Public History Project, because that's obviously something so close to my heart. And I just wanted you to make the audience aware of where that came from.

00:23:58 Dr Ekua Agha

Where did that come from? So, I, as you know, the work, my work was based on, I'd always been Francophone, West Africa, when I completed my doctoral thesis. I think another thing as PhD, as a PhD student, I think we always forget that it's just a project. Intrigue, yeah. The fascination, you are reminded that, oh, it's academic mainly. Or, no, well, it's a, it's, I mean, when you, when you do, when you write a BA, you're expected to write, you know, 5,000 words. That's your evidence that you can do the work. When you do a Master's, you're also given a piece of work and say, this is what you do for your project and that's it. It shows that you can do this work. Now, when I was writing my PhD thesis, I was so, I completely forgot that it was this evidence to show that I can do research. You know, it's not like this is the only thing you would be doing for the rest of your life.

00:25:14 Tholani Alli

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And sorry, just for the audience point of view, remind us, so PhD thesis, around what time did you sort of embark on this?

00:25:21 Dr Ekua Agha

I edited everything finally during COVID, which was 2020, which was, yeah, very interesting times. But I think I was able to submit the work because I'd already, everything had been edited and back, So, we just got a message from the research school saying if you're ready to submit, and I think I was ready. I didn't realize that people were saying, look, listen, I don't have access to the library. But I was, I think, ready to go. So yeah, so when I was finished, you know, I was, well, to be honest, we'd started the project just two years before I completed that.

Tholani Alli

Which project is this?

Dr Ekua Agha

The Nigerian Brazilian. Yeah, but very kind of this on the thing on the ground because I couldn't focus on it, but it needs kind of, you know, building up material. Yeah. And so COVID actually had and then Brexit came along. Yeah. So it really meant the jobs in research, and even the academic world was just completely dire, you know, nobody knew, and we'd lost a lot of funding in Europe, and it was not very, not really good times, because normally, you know, you would have gone from the PhD, I was teaching at the University of London, even while I was writing my PhD, so I had a job in the Department of English and Theatre, where I kind of was teaching. I also had, I was doing work with the London Film School, leading on the politics and culture, and of the, because they have three modules, and St. Ben's film, one of St. Ben's films is actually on that module. So I was leading that particular module called, on the film Hala, XALA, it's a film that everybody knows but they can't link it to Sembène, but anyway, so that was quite interesting that I already was working before I completed my thesis, so I was on, but in terms of actually now thinking what direction am I going to go, fortunately we had this project that was already up and running or started yeah right okay now it's only dawned on me yes I've got a project I'm going to have to now sit down and really do this properly yeah, in the sense that we now have the opportunity to and because now I know how to do research yeah and I think that was where I kind of thought yeah okay this is it, I can now go and start looking at the gap in the project.

00:28:43 Tholani Alli

And just remind us, obviously, this gap. Gap in what? In terms of the gap, in terms of the literature concerning what?

00:28:51 Dr Ekua Agha

Well, in terms of if anybody was going to do serious work, or if, like I said to myself, if I was a PhD student and I wanted to work in Lagos. Yeah, yeah. How, where would I go? Who would I talk to? I mean, when I was doing my PhD, and that's why I said, I know how to do research. The School of Oriental and African Studies was where I spent the rest, I mean, quite a lot of time, because all the archival materials were there. The early part of the project was, for the PhD, was at the British Library, because all the colonial material on France would be held at the British Library. Anything on the African end, with the African writers. So, we knew where to go, you know, even if there were things that we didn't have, or the BFI, because when I started doing film, the British Film Institute Library had all the articles on the films that I was looking for. You know, a lot of the screen magazine, you know, the great magazines on film would have all the, what's it, reviews on a film by Sembène.

So, these were areas where we knew and so-called online journals. And I thought, where would African, and we're trying to encourage research. So, this is where we now want to be one of the leading sort of, you know, archival areas, you know, repository, I'll probably call it, for anything African-Brazilian, especially on Lagos as well. So, we're just collecting from everywhere. Yeah. You know, and part of it is also the recorded material. So, I found that actually, do you area of resistance, you know, as an African who understood what, you know, that there was, we had too much dependency, you know, on thinking that Britain, you know, and the academy would

actually want to hire us, you know, and I'm like, fine, you know, if I get a job with, in the academy, I, yes, I would be absolutely grateful. But right about now, the agenda, looking at the research and looking at funding, back again to when I realized that there was no American foreign policy, you know, towards Africa.

I realized while I was writing my doctoral thesis that we're just like an afterthought, you know, in the academy, not to say that we're not important, but in terms of the funding, you know. And also, for all kinds of reasons, you know, and I'm not saying our own fault, anybody, and also back to, if you really wanted to do research on Africa, people would go into the history department, and I said, please do not go to history, you're not going to get anything there.

So, people go in, and I speak to them, and they think I don't want them to do it, and they come out and they're disappointed. I said, what are you going to hear about? You know, do you really think anyone's going to tell you the history? It's going to still be from a perspective, and that's not what you were after. So, the literature is actually where all the material, because African writers were writing history as literature, because that was the only way that they could actually tell the story. Yeah. So, we're writing history as literature and not history as history, because they wouldn't go into the history department within sort of the Western academia, it goes into the literature.

You have to go to literature. Now, nobody wants to go to literature because it's English, and they think you're going to English, and I'm thinking, no, English is not about grammar, okay? It's about philosophy, you're actually analysing text, you're actually reading meaning in the text, but then you also have to have a sense of history because the background for which the writer is writing is very important. You know, if he's writing about colonial, you need to understand what the colonial era was about. You know, what, when we're talking about French presence in Africa, an African writer is writing about it. What were the French doing at that time? So, this is where it becomes a bit, you know, complex.