



Dr. Ndubuisi Anike Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 – 2024



Tholani Alli

OK, let's start again. Hello Mr Ndu, thank you so much for joining us. My name is Tholani and we have a special guest here by the name of Ndu. Mr Ndu, how are you?

Ndu

I'm fine and yourself?

Tholani Alli

I'm wonderful, thank you so much. So please, in a few words, tell us a little bit about yourself and who it is that you are and what it is that you do, before we go into the further questions.

Ndu

I am an artist, I draw, I paint, I act, I write, I produce, I direct, I sing, I play instruments, but I mostly write. I have a PhD in creative writing so that's what I do, I write.

Tholani Alli

Brilliant, thank you so much for that. So, tell us a little bit in terms of your early life and what are some of the... tell us some of your first contacts with both the Nigerian culture and the British culture. Tell us a little bit about how you are familiar with both or what's made you to be familiar with both.

Ndu

I grew up in Nigeria but when I was a kid, maybe between the ages of six and ten, we lived in what is today called Independence Layout in Enugu. There was this young white girl, you know, her parents lived on our road. And I used to go to their house regularly. And one day

she says to me, what would you like to be when you grow up? I said "I'm going to be a doctor." That's the normal thing to say, you know, for us growing up in this area; you aspire to become a doctor, lawyer or engineer. She says "I'm going to be a dancer." It's quite fascinating. So that was my first encounter. So, years now, I don't know whether she became a dancer, but I became a dancer and I became a doctor (of philosophy). So, but then I went to school, I did primary, secondary. I took a four year break, as a teenager, to work, as a library assistant. My boss was an English woman, Mrs Obi. I got my first university degree in Nigeria. One of my lecturers, Dr. Georgina Gore, was an English woman. And she's actually instrumental to my coming to the UK. In the 80s, when I was in university in Nigeria, we used to have a lot of confrontation, I would say, with the government. We had a military government in Nigeria and they weren't really being kind to people, but we believed we had immunity as university students because in those days most of the people in high places in government had children who were students in Nigerian universities including ours. So, we knew we could go out and make noise and protest without being shot at, because those giving commands to shoot students realised that their children were the demonstrators. These days the rulers all send their kids abroad to study. So anyway, when we demonstrate, the university will ask the students to vacate the campuses. Once this happened, I was sitting at home in Enugu and I got a call from Dr. Gore asking me to come back to the school, that she needed to show me something. And I turned up and she says, "Oh, there's this international playwriting competition that is hosted in England.

And for the first time since its inception 30 years previously, it's been won by somebody who was non- Western"; my late great friend, Biyi Bandele. And she said to me, "I think it's something you can do., You should apply to the competition. So, I went off and wrote two plays and then sent them off. The sending off was a totally different conversation for another time. So anyway, long story short, I forgot all about it. I graduated. Then I came back to collect my national service papers, because in Nigeria, when you finish university, you have to do one-year of national service. So, I went to collect my national, my service papers, and somebody says, you've got a letter. And the letter says, you won the competition. So, I became an international award-winning writer. The organisers asked me to come to the UK. My plan was to come for three weeks and then go back to Nigeria. I came in the summer of 92. They took me to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, they introduced me to a lot of people, and when we came back to London, the organiser, Mr. Cive Wolfe, now late, asks me, "Are you married?" I said, "No." He asks, "Family in Nigeria?" I told him I had siblings but that both my parents were dead. And he says, "I think it would be better for your career to stay in the UK." That's how it started.

Tholani Alli

Right. So, then you were able, was it from then that you were able to bring your family down and then they sort of became accustomed?

Ndu

No, no, no, no, I met my wife here, I got married here. I was in my 20s, and my siblings, who were younger, were being looked after by my uncle. So, I had no responsibilities back in Nigeria and, so, it was easy, agreeing to stay, yes. Then I went further studies and taught in some schools.

Tholani Alli

Right, so obviously, right, so tell us a little bit about your, obviously your early days here, so in terms of when you decided to stay here and settle here, what were some of the hurdles,

the challenges that you faced, you know, and how did you overcome them? Just give us one or two examples.

Ndu

Okay, hurdles. Obviously, when I came, on invitation, rather than going straight to those that invited me, I sought out one of my relatives. And the reason I found out where he lived was because four years previous, he'd gotten married, and his wife came to Nigeria for the first time. She'd lived here all her life. And she gave me their telephone number. So, when I got to Heathrow, rather than calling the organisers of the play competition, I called my relative's house first and the wife answered. I told her I was in London. And she said to come to their house. So, I went and stayed with them, informing the competition organisers of where I was. I had my first play, *The Catalyst*, performed at a place called the York Theatre, Kings Cross, in North London. And I have to say that we had a sold-out audience. And then I got to meet Biyi Bandele, who had won the playwriting competition just before me and who became a great friend. And he, because he'd been here for longer than me, he started integrating me into the different theatrical groups here in the UK, explained to me how to get funding, how to basically navigate the theatre space. I started hitting brick walls. But rather than persevering on being a writer and progressing as a writer, you know, I wanted to go and get more education.

So, I elected to go back to school and I kept going until I got a PhD. And then I also had the opportunity to teach in several universities like Goldsmiths College in London and Northampton University because I had some of my more senior colleagues who were in those places, and they were able to create opportunities for me to come and join them. And in between, I also got involved in performance. I worked with a dance company called Adanta, and we had this distinction of having performance we did, featuring on the back page of every Monday newspaper, I've forgotten which year, but we did a dance, you know, before a Premier League game, all the papers had us on the back of the papers rather than the football. So that kind of basically started aligning us with the society, the British society that we came to be involved in. So, I started becoming involved in other organisations apart from Adanta. I also worked with a company called Adzido at the time it was the largest black performance company in Europe. They had huge funding from the Arts Council. It's defunct now. The founder is now a traditional ruler back in Ghana. But the performers, I work with at Adzido like Mohammed and Lydia and Charles are now successful solo performers. Abass plays jazz drums these days. But, I had stopped being a writer because of the challenges I faced. Yeah, so I did that, and then I also started to do my own stuff. I set up a company called Nestree Productions, and that was the second time I got to work with Alex. The first time I got to work with your founder; he was commissioned for a production, and we had to perform at the WB Yeats theatre in Dublin. Yeah. Are you still there?

Tholani Alli

Yeah, still here.

Ndu

Okay. Yeah. So that was my first encounter working with Alex. We went to Dublin together to do a performance, and then again, Alex acted in two plays that I wrote. Oh, wow. What was the name of that? He played the lead in a play called *Embers*. It was a very sad play. you know, I don't know why I wrote it, possibly reflecting how I felt at the time but we actually had it performed at Southwark Playhouse, so one of the first people to put up a play at Southwark Playhouse before they moved to where they are now. And then later I set up

Tiger and Moon, that was after I got married, because incidentally Tiger and Moon are my first two sons, the first one is called Tiger, the second one is called Moon.

Tholani Alli

Yeah. I was going to ask, uh, how, how did you come up with that name? I was looking, I was like, Tiger and Moon. Where, how did, where did this guy get this name from?

Ndu

Yeah, I had my first two sons.One is studying mechanical engineering. Now the other one will be studying architecture from next year. Right. So, I set that up and, um, been running it, uh, since then, you doing those sort of things. I used to do some of the things that Iroko does, I used to go to schools, go and do stuff, especially around October when they do the Black History Month. But also, I do commissions where I go and stay in a school for up to three months, working with the school and the pupils. But since last few, in the last five years, I've kind of put everything together and concentrated on writing.

Tholani Alli

So please obviously tell us some of the books that you've written and give us a snippet. What do all the books have in common, if I may say, or are they completely different sort of books that focus on different walks of life, areas in life?

Ndu

I write for performance. Well, basically, as you would, really, because of our lived experiences, the writing we do kind of reflect some of that. A few years ago, I wrote for a company in Nigeria, The Amaka Igwe studios. Most people know her because she was one of the pioneers of Nollywood and she was a great play scriptwriter herself and a great director.

Tholani Alli

Sorry, say her name again. What's her name?

Ndu

Amaka Igwe, she's dead now, she died a few years ago, you know, she created a Nigerian television show called Checkmate, which was arguably the biggest thing on Nigerian television at the time. She was a pioneer of the Nollywood film industry. She set up her own production company and commissioned me to write something about Nigerians, in particular living in the United Kingdom. And she gave me an idea, and I developed the idea, and it gave birth to a TV series called Economic Exiles. So we did about 19 episodes of that. And then I also produced Saidi's Song with Kanayo Omo. Kanayo used to live in America and he worked with the likes of Steven Spielberg and Debbie Allen. Anyway, he was part of the movie, Amistad alongside Chiwetel Ejiofor and Razaaq Adoti.

Tholani Alli

Brilliant. So if I may ask, within your career thus far, what are some of the things in the Nigerian culture that you're very passionate about or that have played a deep impression on you, laid a deep impression on you, that you like to portray to others or convey to others in your in your plays or in your books?

Ndu

Okay, see this thing I'm wearing (native traditional igbo cloth) is actually a symbolic dress. It's a national dress of the Igbo people. This is kind of a bit past because this is supposed to be a tiger, not a lion, but most people wear the lion's one because it's easier to get. Anyway, I am passionate about the Igbo cause. The Igbo people are from eastern Nigeria. It used to be a country all by itself called Biafra. And as an academic, we started an academic conference at SOAS in 2012 called the Igbo Conference. And we've had the privilege of having people like Chimamanda Adichie, turn up for the conference; the man who would have been president of Nigeria, Peter Obi; this lady who writes for HBO and Marvel, Professor Nnedi Okorafor. So all these people, people from basically from all over the world, are turning up on a yearly basis to come and help us celebrate Igbo and Nigerian and African culture as part of the Igbo conference and it's still ongoing. I also helped set up a charity, the Umu Igbo Catholic Community (UIKC) which is a British registered charity. In fact this October we'll be celebrating the 25th anniversary of that particular charity so you guys should come and help us celebrate. So essentially any merging of culture that happens here in the UK, I'm an advocate of. There's a company, I can't remember the name immediately, and we used to have celebrations of music from all over the world. every summer and we've worked alongside that with the BBC and in terms of representing African music as a classical rendition of sound alongside western music.

Tholani Alli

Cool, okay, so and in conclusion, wrapping up, tell us what are some of the, well, number one, what are some of the goals that you've yet to achieve that you still aim to achieve in the future, either via your, personally or with the Tiger Moon company you set up, what are some of the outstanding landmarks you're still hoping to achieve?

Ndu

Yeah, thanks for the question. The most important thing I think I would love to have is a library. Several years ago, we, some of us, we went to Liverpool. They have this museum of black influence on Liverpool. You know, it used to be a slave port and we saw things that will bring up goosebumps on your body. And I have this vision of a modern library that is interactive. So, when you come into the space, you can study history. It would be with VR. This is virtual reality. You can study history as current affairs. You can immerse yourself in, And you can take yourself back to the 17th century, walk around and see how they lived, but this will be material that we will have to create and then embed in a system so that people can live those lives. People can understand what happened because there's a Ghanaian proverb, a Ghanaian word called Sankofa, it's about this bird, it's flying, it's always looking back, so the idea is you can't move forward without knowing where you came from. If you don't know where the rain starts falling on you, you wouldn't know where it stops, you know, you start drying up. So bringing our history to the present, it would be my biggest, it's something I'd love to make happen and something I tend to think about.

Tholani Alli

And finally, I mean, you kind of touched upon it, but I want it to come from you yourself. In terms of your legacy, how do you want to be remembered? How do you, what do you want your legacy to be? You know, when people look back and think, wow, Rabindranath, he was known for this or he was, how would you like to be remembered in your field?

Ndu

I've done a few things that I am kind of delighted to have been part of, you know, like the Igbo conference, setting up a charity.

Tholani Alli

And just to confirm, sorry, that Igbo Conference that you set up in 2012, it still goes on every year at SOAS?

Ndu

Yes, you can go on the website. If you actually go to the website, we have our own website, Igboconference.com, even if you go to the SOAS website, you'll also see the link. And yes, if I can create that library based on the experience I had with the museum in Liverpool and the amazing things that AI will be allowing us to do going forward. If I can do that, that would be a great legacy to have.

Tholani Alli

Brilliant. Well, it's been a fantastic eye-opening conversation. I'm definitely going to check out, because I have been to a few conferences at SOAS myself, so I'm definitely going to check out the Igbo conference. I've been to a few that are on African languages, like sort of the interconnection between African languages in Africa, and even it's traced down to modern day 21st century London and I found that very interesting. So, yeah, I'm definitely going to check that out. And lastly, for the audiences.

Ndu

I just wanted to mention one of the things. I just wanted to say something I was at the beginning of its setup that's also ongoing now. It's called the African Theatre Association. So, that's a very continental thing. So, basically, academics from all different countries in Africa based in the UK. It was, you know, it was initiated by Professor Osita Okagbue, who is a Professor at Goldsmiths College, University of London. At the beginning, the conference was just in London, then they started going to different universities in the UK. Now it's actually going to universities in Africa, you know, and then there's a, there's an accompanying journal called the African Performance Review.

Tholani Alli

Brilliant. Okay, brilliant, brilliant. Well, thank you so much. If our audiences want to find out more about you and the work that you do, what are some of the reference points? Tell us some of the websites or books that you have that we can find out more about the good work you do.

Ndu

Okay, from next month August 2024, I'll have a movie I'm planning to call Redemption's Edge out on Amazon Prime.

Tholani Alli

Sorry, what's the name of that movie? That movie's called Redemption's ...?

Ndu

Redemption's Edge.

Tholani Alli

Redemption's Edge, okay,

Ndu

Yes, and the TV series, I think if you go to M&M Digital, www.mandndigital.co.uk, another company I work with, you get information about some of the other things I've done.

Tholani Alli

Brilliant, brilliant. Okay, Dr Ndu, thank you so much. been a privilege to hear from you and have you and definitely we aim to convene maybe at the Igbo conference, God willing, very soon. Thank you.

End

All errors and omissions excepted.