



## Naomi Soneye-Thomas Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 – 2024



### **Sabrina**

Do you want to tell me a little bit about what you do and what kind of things you like to make?

### **Naomi**

Yeah. So, at the moment, I'm mostly focused on writing, I would say, but I have done some directing. I just finished directing a short film, a short dance film.

Which is about how music connects Nigerian diaspora. So, we've got some footage from Nigeria, we filmed some in London, which was cool. I think I like to make that explores my culture, and this story I wanted to tell because it's quite a joyful story about community within the Black British community, which often our stories aren't told in in a joyful way. So, I wanted to sort of sort of celebrate culture and not focus on trauma.

**Sabrina**

Does that come from your upbringing or is that more as you've gotten older?

**Naomi**

Yeah, I think as I am older, one of the first short films I got funding for was about stop and search of black men. So, it wasn't like the most uplifting story. I studied law at Uni, so I've always sort of been into social issues and that kind of thing. So, I wanted to explore that story and I used animation at the time because I thought if I do it live action then it's just going to be traumatising for audiences. So, I've always had this sort of thoughts in my mind about not traumatising people with the work that I make, even if it is a heavy topic. But after I made that film, I was like, actually I want to sort of focus more on just telling them out and out positive stories at the moment it could change again because I think there's still merit in telling stories that are, you know, like, socially relevant but hard to watch sometimes. I think it can raise awareness of different issues, but I think if I do issue based work, I'd probably prefer it to be documentary.

**Sabrina**

Tell me a bit about yourself, about your family. Did you grow up in in London?

**Naomi**

Yeah. I grew up in Walthamstow in East London, so I first came across IROKO when I was about 12 maybe, I was quite young. I used to go to the workshops that they ran in the summer holidays in Newham.

My family of half Nigerian, half Jamaican heritage. And then I also my grandma on the Nigerian side, she lived with us from when I was about six years old. So, I thought I've always felt quite close to the Nigerian side of my family.

But my parents were both born in London as well. So, what generation does, that make me like second or third or something?

Yeah, but having my grandma around just has that. It brought us proximity to Nigerian culture, I would say. And then also the church that I go to is a Nigerian church. So, I hear it every week where I go there. I'm hearing songs in Yoruba. Although I don't speak Yoruba fluently. Or very well at all so I'm doing classes at the moment to try and improve my Yoruba. So yeah, I think that's my sort of connection to culture and where I come from.

**Sabrina**

I guess with your grandma living at home like as she was, she was born in Nigeria.

**Naomi**

Yeah, she was born in Nigeria. She came to England in the 60s, I think. Yeah. And then my mum was born here.

I think it's impacted even my way of thinking. I think there's some sort of things within the culture that just, I don't know, they're just very ingrained within me. So even if it's like some things that you have working hard, putting education at the forefront. It's probably why I did law at Uni and then even things that make me laugh like superstitions that you're not allowed to whistle at night. Like things like that that are just still stuck in my head, to be honest and, yeah, I think Nigerians are quite superstitious. So that's always in my head. Then cultural things like how you greet your elders. Yeah, when I went to church and like, when I travelled to Nigeria and I went to church, it was practically the same as how it was in England anyway, so I felt like I just got slot right in there. Whereas generally when I've been to Nigeria, I feel like when I'm in England, I tell people I'm Nigerian. But then when I actually went to Nigeria, I realised that I'm quite British. Cause there's a lot of things that culturally, is different. Especially if my grandma's, like she came to England so long ago, she would have been born like nearly 100 years ago, so the way that she is it's like an older version of Yoruba culture. And since then, it's moved on. So, maybe I'm not as in tune with all the modern way that it works nowadays, I suppose.

**Sabrina**

Do you do you find it easy to go back to Nigeria and do you feel like you're saying, you kind of feel bit more British when you go back?

Apart from like the church side of things, that seems to be like one of the constants.

**Naomi**

Yeah, church is definitely a constant. Yeah, there's just things that are just like, just a bit different, I suppose. Even how you carry yourself, I think you have to have a sort of, confidence there to get by. Like, say you go to the market and you're negotiating and things like that. You need to be very like assured of yourself. It's not, you know, British, can be a bit like, I'm so polite, I'm sorry, it doesn't really work there.

So you need to have that sort of confidence too. My mum's got two sisters that live there, so I've got first cousins, a lot of first cousins in Nigeria. So, when I go there, I tend to not stay in a hotel, we just stay with them in their house, which is really nice. But it's just when I landed in Lagos, there's just so many people, it's quite noisy, it's vibrant. It was just a

different way of life to not that London is not a big city, but there was just so many people. That it just took a little bit of adjusting to.

### **Sabrina**

Of course, and I guess growing up in the UK with all of that heritage at home and with your extended family and stuff like how did you find like I guess growing up in the UK?

### **Naomi**

Yeah, I think I've culturally, I suppose it's quite specific being like black British. There's lots of jokes and things that I find it funny. I find Nigerians funny. I find lots of things in our culture to be funny and it just makes me laugh. So, I think that's another reason when I'm writing that I try and bring that joy into it because I think it. I think it's quite a joyful experience, to be black British and to be Nigerian specifically. But obviously there's issues when you're growing up, I suppose. I don't know. Going through puberty and, you know, all that kind of stuff that you do as a teenager and I guess the negative side of being in East London maybe around safety is I think it was worse for my brother.

Well, it's different for women, isn't it? As a woman, you're thinking about your safety is in, like, I don't know, especially in your 20s, you're thinking about men and things like that when you're walking around at late at night. Whereas with my brother growing up, my mum was worried about keeping him safe and out of harm's way with like knife crime and things like that. So just making sure that if we're going out that they know where we are, that we're not falling into the wrong sort of groups or the wrong crowds. We keep the values that my grandma and that my parents would have instilled in us, and that we're not getting swayed by other temptations.

### **Sabrina**

I guess more recently like, how have you found like all of those kind of experiences like those kind of programmes (*Thousand Stories Shadow Programme / All Three Media / New Drama Script Award 2020*) and like writing your stories from like you say with the positive Nigerian aspect to it?

### **Naomi**

I think stories that I'm drawn to, I'll talk about other work, I suppose, like one of my favourite plays was *Nine Nights*, which is not a Nigerian story, but on my Jamaican side I could just it was like watching my family on stage. But then it was like light and dark. It was a play about grief. Like there's so much humour in it. And I think when I write it's like I try to not make it so heavy that you can't watch it, but then also just have that, just try and sort of

reflect all life. There's like light and dark in life.

So I think those are the kind of stories that have resonated when I've when I've applied to schemes, it might be about a serious topic, but there'll always be some level of humour in it.

Yeah, it was good, though. I think with the *All Three Media* one, I submitted a script about immigration. I'm just trying to remember now. Sorry. I'm literally just going back through my memories.

It was *Thousand Stories*, that one was really good because they invited everyone that was shortlisted to do a couple of days at the NFTS in Beaconsfield. So, it was like whether you won or not, you still got a lot of value out of it. And then they emailed us and asked who we'd like to see speak as part of the workshops, who do we want to hear from. So, I just sent a list of people I'd like to hear from. And then they managed to book like a [blank], [blank]. Like I'd seen their work, and I specifically said I wanted to hear from them. So that was really cool because most schemes didn't really run like that, I suppose where you have such a big input on the programme and what you want to get out of it.

And then the *Casualty* credit also came from a scheme. I submitted the play that I did at 503. I submitted that and then I did a shadow script. So, you write a script that's not for broadcast and then after that they commission the script. It was good because it feels like you're just going up in a ladder, I suppose. I think now my main focus has to be on I need to write another spec script just to on a story that I really want to tell.

But I think it's just been about changing my mindset. The first scheme I with the BBC was trying to get us to write for TV and I never thought that it was something that I could do until I was on the scheme. Cause otherwise you just have no idea how to get into that sort of field cause no one in my family really works in those creative industries.

So I joined National Youth Theatre around the same time I was at uni. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. So, I was studying law and then doing National Youth Theatre at the same time. It was like a six-week course with them during the summer and we did a one-day session on writing and then that's when I thought I quite like writing. But up until then, it was always sort of more performance based and when I did *Flux* at 503, I played one of the characters. So, I still do it sometimes, but I think that's when I figured that writing could be a good focus for me.

### **Sabrina**

You mentioned as well that no one in your family had really had a creative kind of background. What kind of things did they do?

### **Naomi**

My mum's a teacher. My dad works for the local council. My grandma was a nurse. So yeah, all different things. But not specific to creativity. Yeah, sometimes my mum does ask me what exactly it is that I do. I'm like hmm, what do I do?

But I guess when you're at school, no one, really, I guess you know actors exist because you see them on screen. But all the other sort of roles that are behind the camera are sort of quite elusive. You don't really know what happens unless you know someone that's that works in that field, you wouldn't know what all the jobs were when you're at school, because everyone just focusses on the I don't know, other fields I would say. So, I think partly it's been sort of discovering what jobs they even are in the creative fields.

### **Sabrina**

Do you have an idea for what kind of stories you want to keep telling?

### **Naomi**

Yeah, I think so. I've got a few different ideas. I just need to spend time writing it, but I'm also on maternity leave right now. I open my laptop sometimes and like, oh gosh, I don't have the medical capacity to start writing right now. But yeah, I think.

Yeah, I want to write, I need to write a like a one-hour serial just to demonstrate what like who I am, I suppose. But I think writing the play opened a lot of doors for me, but I just need to do another one for screen.

I think what I enjoy doing actually, which I think is hard in film and screen. I like working quite collaboratively. I like it. That's I love about theatre is like being in a room with a bunch of creatives or artists and then playing coming up with ideas. Whereas when you're writing, sometimes it can be quite isolating and I don't think sometimes sitting in front of my laptop is the best way to just, come up with ideas, I suppose. I think with the play that I wrote, I just come back from doing some R&D in Cardiff, for a company called *Theo*. And I think just being in the room for like two weeks with them just made my brain just start thinking, you know, when you're just in that creative sort of mindset.

But I think sometimes that's missing from screen. You don't really always get. a lot of rehearsal time, you don't get time to R&D necessarily. You don't get time to sort of play, I suppose. And there are some companies that are trying to do that in screen, but I think it's not really the mainstream way of working, so that that's for me with yeah, if I can, if I can be in a space where I feel like I'm doing other creatives and I'm collaborating that's when I'm sort of about my happiest.

**Sabrina**

You said you're on maternity leave. Have you found that the traditions you were learning have been seeping into your own parenting?

**Naomi**

To some extent. I think maybe he's still a bit too young to fully, fully experience it, but we did, do we did a naming ceremony so. Well, he's so, yeah. So now he's three-quarters Jamaican. A quarter Nigerian. But I was like, I really, really want a naming ceremony, that's important to me. So, he's got like 20 different Yoruba names.

Yeah, not all on the birth certificate, but that was quite important to me and I'll, I'll take him to the same church that I went to. So, I feel like he'll learn that kind of culture. But I also really, really wanting to learn Yoruba. That's one of the reasons I've gone back to Yoruba classes cause I can't teach him the language, but I also don't want him to learn it if I can't speak it because he'll just, I'll just teach my kids a language that I can't speak. It's setting myself up for challenges.

**Sabrina**

Is there anything that you kind of like want to like add or anything?

**Naomi**

I think about the hardest thing is just always funding, to be honest. Yeah and I think sometimes when you do lots of schemes as well, there's an argument that a lot of us. I've seen people say it's like we're sort of over mentored, but underfunded. It was like, you can do lots and lots of schemes, but at some point, you just have to go and do the thing that you want to do. So, I guess that's the that's the challenge, finding that balance between mentoring and actually getting the funding that you need.

But yeah, one of the next projects I want to make is actually linking the church, and I've noticed a lot of musicians from my church. Because they play instruments like the talking drum, which, a lot of people don't know. I think that the church is sort of preserved a lot of elements of Yoruba culture and Nigerian, not necessarily just Yoruba, West Africa and Nigerian culture that otherwise might have been lost.

So a lot of the musicians there have been picked up by mainstream artists like *Burna Boy* and things like that, and they've been, like a few of them, are quite young and like one of them is 17 and he played at Wembley, playing the talking drum. He's now part of *Burna Boy's* band.

So, I want to, it was quite an uplifting story that I want to tell next. It's just getting the funding in place. It's it's the main challenge and then deciding the scale of it. So, there's a short film version of it, but there's also a feature film version where you look at different communities and places like Cuba, where they've also preserved Yoruba culture because when I went to Cuba few years ago and they have things that I really, really strongly

recognise from my church and from being in Nigeria. That's just preserved there by, I guess, the slave trade.

I saw an instrument there and I said, oh, what's this? And they said they said it's a Shekere which is the same. That's what we call it. They have some elements of Yoruba in their language as well.

So yeah, that to me, I was like, oh, that's really interesting how that elements of Yoruba culture have just been preserved in different pockets of the world.

**Sabrina**

Do you find like, do you find what like these kind of stories is it more difficult to get funding? Is it like about the same as anyone else that you would speak to, to get funding like in terms of difficulty?

**Naomi**

It has been a bit more difficult to fund this one. We've applied to a few different schemes. I'm thinking now.

Yes, but maybe it could be. Could be a bit more difficult, but I think it's still trying to figure out if it you know some people when you when I've told them about the idea, they're more interested in the church and the religious aspects and how Christianity was brought to Nigeria. But I suppose I'm kind of more interested in, I am interested in that, but I'm also interested in this link between. It's a bit like how gospel music in America and soul, that kind of link between gospel and soul at that time. It's that kind of thing where you're noticing that there's like a talent stream from the church into Afrobeats and into mainstream music.

**Sabrina**

Yeah. That's great. Thank you so much for your time.

**Naomi**

Okay.

**Sabrina**

This is great. It's great to meet you.

**Naomi**

Thank you. Bye.

End

*All errors and omissions excepted.*