Toyin Agbetu Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 - 2024

Introduction

My name is Toyin Agbetu. In my community they refer to me as Brother Dr Toyin. I am 57 years of age. I was born in Hackney. My family arrived in the UK in the early 1960s. I was born in Hackney and have always lived and worked in this particular borough, which is in London, East London.

I have moved around the borough. So, I have lived in Newington Green, Stoke Newington. I'm now in Homerton. There is something about the borough that I quite like. It's always had this radical socialist character. But I work obviously across the whole of the UK and also internationally as well.

Childhood Memories

When I think about my childhood. My parents arriving during the early 1960s. It's very interesting, because their journey, their narrative, is actually eradicated from the British history of African people arriving. Everyone seems to think that it starts at Windrush but my parents were here and even when they were here, there were other people they knew who were here before them. It's one of the reasons I'm a Pan-Africanist.

But my childhood was quite a complicated one. We were financially quite poor. My Dad was working class, but we were rich in love. I was raised by a single parent. My mother and father were initially together. They did separate. My mother went back to Nigeria. They met in Ijebu Ode in Nigeria. My father came first, and my mother came afterwards from what I can tell. But, yeah! It was an interesting childhood.

When I say I was rich in love. I grew up with my younger sister. That's Funmi, Oluwafunmi. Er sorry. Oluwatoyin.. that's me… Olufumilayo. I'm trying to think now. I don't normally talk about my family or personal matters. It's very interesting. We were quite close. We were very close. It was challenging in the sense that when my mother and father were not getting on.

There was a time when we were in a children's home. That wasn't the greatest of experiences but being together was helpful. My Dad visiting, my Mum visiting was good. I think like many Nigerians of that era, we were part fostered at one stage. Sometimes good experiences sometimes pretty bad experiences. But when my father got custody of us, which in the 60s was unheard of for a man to get custody of his children at that time. It was quite a battle between him and my mother. He got custody, we were happy and from that point onwards our childhood was positive. It was a good childhood.

Family and Childhood influences

My mother was a Christian, my father was a Muslim. So, in one house, we were aware of two different spiritual, religious practices going on. My father, even though he wouldn't have called himself a Pan Africanist, he exposed us to Pan Africanist ideas. So, we grew up listening to Fela (Kuti), King Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey. So, we heard these things. Our Yoruba came through pidgin, listening to certain Creoles and things through our childhood. So, it's not very good but we kind of heard these things. My father used to read a magazine called 'The West African.' I used to watch him and we'd watch the news together and we'd talk about things. But he also wanted us to understand where we were now.

He left Nigeria. He was one of those pioneers. He wanted to find a better life. Things weren't particularly good in Nigeria in those times, especially if you weren't from wealth. And so we had the best of both worlds. In fact, in many ways we took being African for granted. We didn't realise how special it was, we didn't realise the richness that came with it. It was just normal. We'd eat eba and pounded yam. So we learned how to cook stew okra, moi moi. It was just normal. It wasn't anything special. We were in England. The only thing that we thought was a bit strange, was that we would eat with our hands and everyone else would eat with knives and forks but that was just the way it was. And sometimes we would have chips…and chips we'd eat with our hands, but it didn't taste as nice as Eba, you know. So it was a mixture of these things without it being pushed down our throats a lot.

My mum, because she was Christian was more into the Church. So, she would come home with the bible. We'd have to say psalms, prayers and things, which I wasn't a fan of but it was part of the ritual and so we saw it all. It that was very useful and it's probably why myself and my sister are the way we are. My youngest sister, I have two sisters. Unfortunately, when my mother went back to Nigeria she went with her. So we didn't grow up together with our baby sister. She speaks Yoruba fluently and so do my nieces and stuff. While me and my sister who were raised here are the ones everyone laughs at when we try to pronounce Yoruba words.

So there was a strong, I don't use the word Black, I don't use racialising language. I don't talk about Black or White people. I talk about Africans, or Europeans or Asians. But there was a strong African community in a sense, but it was framed through Blackness and so to be African was to be different from being Black. Black was (a category) that the Europeans created for us. And so, what would happen is that we would go to school and my sister would have her hair done in plaits using different styles using thread and she would be teased. She'd be called spider head. It was quite bad. We would face Afriphobia not just from society at large but also from some of our family with Caribbean heritage.

And so my father, that's why I say he was a Pan -Africanist, he would let us know that even though we are being bullied by people who look like us, we are still family, and that the loss of memory of culture, of language is what was causing this. And so we had to be stronger than turning to anger and hate. It was difficult to hear this at times as a child to hear that sometimes. Sometimes we wanted to fight back. But our father, he was a very peaceful man, a calm and wise man, he was very much – "that's our family".

And he, as a parent was very mixed in his cultural approaches, we'd know about our Yoruba heritage, our food, our practices but at the same time, he'd also go to the pub. His best friend was Jamaican. He would play darts and pool. I never understood him not drinking but of course, when you realise he was a Muslim it makes more sense. I never saw him drunk. It was very strange all these different things. He was very much a hybrid but he would adapt his culture to make sure he was a good role model for us, and so that we could survive in a hostile space.

The one thing we didn't have, unfortunately was connection with our Nigerian community in London. So, we'd see a few cousins and aunts. And when uncles would come from Nigeria, they would stay with us. He would give up his bed or we would give up our beds, but we didn't mingle as much. Which was a shame but I'm sure he had his reasons.

Look, I'm not going to lie, when it was bad, it was bad. Some aspects when my father and mother were not at the best, there were some things that were not good but yes largely, my father was a positive influence, and afterwards that changed everything.

Education

My first primary school was I think in Stoke Newington. It was Jubilee Primary; it was named after the Queen's Jubilee or some nonsense like that. I can't remember which (year was the) monarch's jubilee. It was okay! Like I said we had the bullying. We had the Afriphobia. It was a school. We learned how to read and write and count and play around. It wasn't that formative in my development. As with most other children, you just learned the basics.

My secondary school, Woodberry Down was more of an influence on my character. Going to secondary school was quite, I won't say traumatic, but it was quite challenging, because you meet different people, you are a different age, your language is changing, and I was introduced to violence much more so from other children at secondary school than in primary school. In primary the bullying would happen, but it was more name calling by other students and stuff like that but in secondary school, it was violence. I had a fight on the first day of school. That wasn't very nice, and I continued to have fights throughout most of my secondary school life. But I enjoyed learning. That was the only good thing. I was a very good scholar there. I learned a lot.

Whilst I learned a lot, again it was like primary school. I didn't learn about the things I wanted to learn. The topics I was interested in they wouldn't cover. So, when I finished in secondary school when I got my grades from my exams, I got As and Bs in everything apart from English Literature and History. I was quite surprised I failed those two topics. And anyone who knows me says but Toyin you love writing, you have knowledge of history but now I know that the things I was being taught had no relevance to me. And when I have no interest, I don't apply myself. So, in maths I did well. In physics I did well. In graphical communications, I did well. In everything I did well apart from those two topics.

So school was interesting. Even when I stayed for A levels, initially I found it very boring. A level maths I couldn't get on with. I took computer programming because I was fascinated with computers, I loved gaming anything to do with electronics, but they wouldn't allow me to take the module on programming I wanted because I was self-taught. So, they allowed me onto the course even though I didn't have the credentials, as I was self-taught in computing.

My Aunty Nike, she had told me if I got certain grades, she would buy me a ZX Spectrum, in fact a ZX81 I think it was. It was a computer everyone wanted, and I got the grades, and she got me a computer, thank you Aunty, and that started me off in programming. So, I was self-taught. I ended up knowing more about computers than most of the teachers in my school. I was this whiz kid. When I finished my exams and went to sixth form, and I wanted to take up that subject, they wouldn't let me take the advanced class. They put me in the beginner's

class. They thought, well you are a young boy, how can you know about this. So it became very boring.

Dropping out of school

What happened continuously was that the lecturer at the time at the college would keep asking me questions on things they didn't know. They would come to me as a student. The class just found it funny but for me it was just boring. I wanted to learn. I was in sixth form now. I wanted to grow. So I started missing school. I was still having fights. I never liked bullies and my school had a lot of bullies. Unfortunately, a lot of them were African but there was a lot of bullying. I read a lot of comics and my father raised me on certain principles. I would always get involved in stopping violence and bullying. So interesting times. My school life isn't something I think of now but it was formative…I think when I dropped out. I shocked everybody and I said that's it! Even my father was surprised but he supported me, which was very good.

When I dropped out of school, I remember sitting down with my father and talking to him and he asked me what I wanted to do now. One of the things that I realised was that every time I was doing well in my studies, I was progressing and getting good grades at school, music played a part in my life. So when I left sixth form and dropped out of A levels, I had the chance to reflect on the things that made me happy, the things I wanted to do in my life. So even though I was quite young, I was still in my teens. I realised that my interest in computers was more than just a hobby. At that time, I was teaching computer programming to young people. I was developing software for companies like Intelligence Software, Sinclair Research, even making music for Nintendo video games. So computers were just a big part of my life but also music was a big part of my life.

So my father did something that was unique to Nigerians of that era. I said to him. "Daddy, I want to be involved in making music, I want to set up a record label. I want to be an artist. Something. "My Dad said, "are you sure?" And I said "yes". He asked me how and I explained to him. I had outlined a plan to him and his decision then changed the course of my life forever because he supported me. He said Toyin you have thought this through. He said okay you go and do that.

Setting up a Record Label

It was an amazing time because then I started a record label. There is a long history about the record label. In short, I the label ran for over a decade. I had hundreds of releases. I had staff, studio, offices. I was able to pay my father back. This was the first time I could contribute to bills. It was a big risk but the fact that my father believed in me. I remember some of my family in Nigeria being confused. They were asking, "what is Toyin doing? He's a computer genius and now he's making music. What is this?"

But it was the right thing for me. My father had that vision. He left Nigeria in many ways to open up possibilities. And that is what happened with me. That was quite instrumental for me. What I learned through running my own business, running a record label, having staff, offices, studios, all these kinds of things that go with it. Distribution companies, licencing deals, contracts, bills, all of that set me up for the life that would come as became older.

I'd like to start from the position that all artists are entwined with activism in some way. The act of being an artist, to create things out of nothing. To realise a new world, a new sound or new piece of cloth or food. There is an experimentation with what we have, in trying to make things different. In trying to make things better. So that seed was inside me. There were two transitions that led me to that kind of thinking. The first was a tragic one. That was my father passing. He passed quite young. He passed in his early 50s. it was quite unexpected. He was on the phone to his girlfriend and his heart gave way.

He had something that many males from West Africans suffer. Cardiomyopathy, it's hereditary. It's something that we just have to live with. You might hear of footballers from Nigeria or Ghana dropping dead on the pitch. So this is what happened. We were completely unprepared for it…. completely unprepared for it. What happened then is that I couldn't make music after that. I'd go into the studio to try make a song, but I didn't realise that making music was a spiritual process. So I'd go to the studio and the music was totally depressing. The music was bland. It had nothing in it. That was because I was mourning my father's loss. I couldn't process it, I couldn't create.

But fortunately, my son had been born at that stage. My first son, who only got to know his grandfather for only six months. His birth and fatherhood, becoming a parent changed my vision about my responsibilities to the world. I believed that I am going to be an ancestor one day just like my father became one. My son didn't ask to come into this world. I brought him here with his mother. So it was my responsibility to make this place a little more beautiful before I leave.

A Path towards Activism and Creating Ligali Organisation.

So that started me on the path towards activism. I got involved in higher education. I went to the University of East London. That's where I did my undergraduate programme. I was blessed to meet the amazing Dr Abiola Ogunsola. Up to a long time I thought that education, universities was really about talking to yourself. Academics talking to themselves. Not really contributing to the world. And she showed me another way. She ran a module called EDUCOM, Education and Community Development and it was amazing. It showed how knowledge could be used in service to people. She would travel back to Nigeria. She would help them develop a feminist discourse, ideas and projects. She would come back to the UK and she would develop these resources and take them back to Nigeria. And had this lovely circle of people. I met people like Dr Kimani Nehusi, who was an Egyptologist, and enriched my understanding of Pan-Africanism. And I realised that as much as I loved my music and even though I dropped out of sixth form and A levels on purpose. I am a nerd. I like knowledge.

So I finished my undergraduate course and drifted into firming up my organisation, Ligali. The Ligali organisation. That came about when I met a wonderful Sister. An amazing African woman from the Spice Island, Grenada. I am looking at the Continent, the Caribbean, the diaspora as well. So it was one of those strange things that as a Pan Africanist, I don't just see the continent of Africa, and its geographical space as our home. I see it as our motherland, but we have been dispersed all over. So she was Grenadian.

But what happened is that I started Ligali organisation. I was very serious and poo faced at the time. She had this creative artistry about the way she did things. Together we were able to set up something in 2000 and from there the organisation just grew and grew and grew. That's where I am now.

The aims of Ligali started off really simple. We were designed or set up to challenge the misrepresentation of African people in the British media. That's what the organisation first started out. So there was myself. I had a child. Emma the person I worked with she had children. We could see that the media was making our children hate themselves. It was feeding stereotypes against us. We didn't have the word Afriphobia, it didin't existed (at the time) but that was what we were dealing with. The organisation just became more successful. We challenged programme makers. I think people watch television and they listen to the radio now and they see the presence of African people on soaps, dramas. They see them in parliament. But they don't recognise that twenty odd years ago, it wasn't like that.

The BBC would be putting out programmes called ‘The trouble with Black men.’ They would be putting on documentaries and reality programmes where we were debasing ourselves. I think Big Brother was a source of embarrassment. It was a very toxic space. So through Ligali we made links with people who worked inside those organisations. People who consumed that media. They would contact us, with complaints, they would give us heads up and tips (of what was coming), and because I had a way with words and Emma had a way with presentation and the ideological thinking behind those words, we were able to challenge institutions that up until then, many of us thought were untouchable. So we would write letters of complaints. We would organise meetings. We would put focus groups on, and we would push back really hard until those programmes changed.

People watch things like Eastenders and they forget how bad it was. Well, Ligali was involved in transforming many of those kinds of sitcoms, those soap dramas etc. but we did it behind closed doors. I think what worked for us, why we became so successful. At our height we had around 10,000 members. What worked for us is that we would do the work silently and then publish the results on our website. So, there are thousands of articles on the Ligali website which is of us just slowly, surely, pushing, pushing and pushing and getting that success. And then we would move onto another programme, another channel, another media, whether it was television, radio, museums wherever African people were represented. When I say Africans, I mean it in the Pan African sense. Africans from the continent, Africans from the Caribbean, from the diaspora.

We kept on growing and I think what happened at one stage. A lot of things happened but I remember Emma and I, we had a discussion that we realised we had become so successful in our work that people were asking us to help in other areas. So we were dealing with school exclusions, stop and search. And because we knew how to push back against institutions, people were coming to us and so we did.

I think in someways that might have been a mistake. Not the work that we did, but it overwhelmed us with work. So we were moving from just dealing with the media to dealing with all aspects of British society and public institutions. So even though we were good at it, we didn’t have the resources and at the height of it, even we had around 10,000 members who online every week, there were only ten of us, doing the big work, conferences and meetings and two of us, doing the day-to-day work.

The finances came from our community, from our family, from our friends. We weren’t funded by the government; we weren’t funded by the institutions. We may have got a grant for a couple of hundred pounds here and there, but everything was coming out of our pocket generally.

It was difficult coping with the success. Our community would say well here is an organisation that is effective. So, they would chuck more and more work at us. I don’t ever regret building Ligali. I should say that Ligali was my father’s name. His name was Ligali Ayinde Agbetu. So when he passed away. That is a very important part. When he passed away and because it was so sudden, when I decided to set up an organisation, I wanted to invoke his name every day. So by naming the organisation after him, he still lives.

And what people didn’t understand, those who are Afriphobic and racist against us. They didn’t understand that because the organisation was named after my father, there is no circumstance on this planet that I will compromise our mission. There is nothing anyone can do to ever make us betray African values. It was a very principled thing. It’s a very spiritual connection to me. So that is how the Ligali organisation grew. And that’s its development. There were other things, you can ask me questions about.

Navigating a Dual Heritage

I try to navigate being a person of African heritage and British, it's very tricky. If someone asks me, are you Nigerian, I am of course Nigerian and I am proud of being Nigerian we are an amazing people, our heritage our culture. I don't like to say resilience, that has been overused now. But I don't use the word Nigerian. And I know that sometimes that causes problems with people. I always say I am a Yoruba man. If I'm in Nigeria I tend to lean towards using Nigerian because I don't want to start causing any conflicts like I am being dismissive of uHausa or Ibo, but I am a Pan Africanist

I'm not using the name Nigeria because I know its root; I'm an academic. It was the wife of Frederick Lugard, who came up with it. It means the area of the N words I can't name myself after that. Many African nations renamed themselves. Ghana was the Gold Coast, they renamed themselves. Burkina Faso Was called Upper Volta, they renamed themselves. Zimbabwe was called Rhodesia, they renamed themselves. Nigeria still has to do that work. So we are not naming ourselves after someone who hated us and killed us. I'm proud to be what people refer to as a Nigerian, but I call myself, and I refer to being a Yoruba man first. More than anything, I am also an African. So the divisions that happened at the Berlin Conference, where we had these borders erected and Eurocentric names given to us. I am interested in dismantling them so that we can see each other as family.

In the UK, sometimes these values become re-erected. We see differences between those of us who have experienced Francophone colonisation and Anglophone colonisation. It is a struggle to continuously navigate all these traps that we have. But in my day-to-day life. I'm proud of my heritage. I'm proud of what we have achieved. I'm upset about the challenges that we still have to go through. I'm upset that there is so much impoverishment, that takes place, its needless. That we still use political systems that are not fit for purpose, that we have inherited. But I am focused on the people. Those of us who love self and see a better future and a way forward.

The thing about being in the UK, is there is a strength and a weakness. One of the weaknesses is that the UK is continuously trying to get us to reject our heritage, our identity, to anglicize us, to assimilate us. To make us look down at those who don't speak fluent English as if that's a sign of intelligence. And those things anger me if I'm being honest with you.

But the positive is, while we are here. We are in many ways getting the best of both worlds. We are able to critique and analyse and learn from those that extracted and exploited us. We were able to build upon the work of our ancestors who came before us and paved these ways of opportunities. People don't always understand how much money we send back home through remittances and how we help with development of our homelands even if we are here. People don't understand that when you are outside the continent, Pan African unity becomes stronger because you are isolated you are more likely to break bread with a Ghanaian, with a Gambian, with someone from Uganda, someone from Somalia. Because you recognise that you're family. All those national ties, which are artificial, fall to the wayside. So it's a complex, difficult tightrope that we have to walk.

I'm going to be fussy with words because I'm nerd, I am an academic, I'm a Pan Africanist this is part of our tradition. But it's not just meaningless discourse. I see all Africans as family. That is what my father gave me as a child. That is what I see in reality as an adult. The work of Ligali has reaffirmed that. Because as an organisation, it wasn't just Africans with Nigerian heritage, for want of a better phrase, who supported me. It was Africans from all over the continent and the diaspora. When I grew up, with that hatred, that Afriphobia, that was attacking myself, that attacked my sister calling us boo boos, from African people that was the kind of terms they use. That has been diminished and for that I'm thankful.