

University of Minnesota Sesquicentennial Diversity Project

Interview with Toja Okoh

Interviewed by Ann M. Pflaum

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Toja Okoh - TO
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: For the tape recorder because this will be transcribed, could you spell your name for me so I'm sure I have it correct.

TO: My full name or my shortened version?

AP: Your full name would be great.

TO: It's Oghenetoja. The last name is spelled Okoh.

AP: And you like to be called . . .

TO: Toja.

AP: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself—where you were born, where you grew up, how you sort of got yourself to the university?

TO: I was born in the United States in International Falls, Minnesota. Shortly after I was born my parents moved to Nigeria, and I spent my first nine years in Nigeria. Then at age nine we moved back to the United States to Duluth, Minnesota. I spent the rest of my primary school years in Minnesota, in Duluth.

AP: Can you give me the approximate years?

TO: We went to the United States in 1986.

AP: And you were how old in that year?

TO: I was nine, going on ten. I was born in 1976, so that would have been my tenth year. From 1986 to 1992 we lived in Duluth. After that we moved to Plymouth, Minnesota, where I live right now, and finished my high school there. I moved down here when I was sixteen.

AP: What high school did you graduate from?

TO: I graduated from Wayzata High School.

AP: How did you decide on the U?

TO: I had applied to three other universities, and decided on the university because it was close; because I had funding to go there, more funding there than anywhere else; and I just didn't know where else to go, so I decided to make that decision because it was pretty simple to make.

AP: What year did you start then as a freshman?

TO: I started as a freshman, I was eighteen.

AP: And the fall of what year?

TO: The fall of 1994.

AP: Did you commute or did you live on campus?

TO: I lived on campus for the first two years.

AP: Where did you live?

TO: I moved around a lot. I started out in Middlebrook Hall. Then I ended up at Territorial. Then I moved into Comstock.

AP: Did you do any clubs or student organizations at that time?

TO: I think the only club I was in was Ballroom Dancing, so I wasn't really that involved with any of that.

AP: How did you pick a major?

TO: I was very, very frustrated with my first major, which was going to be fine arts or studio arts. I was kind of shopping around and I heard of a program, the MacArthur Program, undergraduate program, at the end of my freshman year. But technically I had sophomore status, so I was eligible to get into this program. The program was an interdisciplinary program focusing on international relations and international issues, and I was really interested and started to become really interested in history because that was a big focus and emphasis in the program. It was actually South African history. So I just kind of started asking questions about the history department and also the African/Afro Studies Department, and just got hooked in. I said I'd rather do these two majors than

spend seven or eight years trying to get a fine arts degree at the university, so that's what I decided to do.

AP: Do you have faculty members that you remember from those years?

TO: I remember working specifically with Ben Pike, Allen Isaacman, and John Wright.

AP: Did you find yourself specializing perhaps based on your experience in Nigeria before, or did you find yourself just drawn to particular topics?

TO: I'm not really sure. Based on my experience, that was my first entry into history. I really was interested in African history and especially West African history. I also had particular topics that had particular interest for me, particularly looking at issues of nationalism, identity and culture. Those were the things that I tended to be drawn to.

AP: How did your family happen to be in Nigeria?

TO: My father is Nigerian. That explains my name.

AP: That would explain your getting to Nigeria.

TO: We planned to live there for the rest of our lives. It's just that things got really, really bad in the years between '84 and '86. There were a series of coups, and that's why we decided to move back to the United States. But we didn't plan on staying here at all. We thought we would go back within a few months, but things never got better.

AP: You're probably going to stay here, then? Having been born here, you are a U.S. citizen, or do you have dual citizenship?

TO: In the United States they only recognize one citizenship, so I am American and because I was born here there is no question of citizenship. As far as going to Nigeria, they recognize my dual citizenship.

AP: That's nice. You have the advantage of both world.

TO: Yes.

AP: I can see how the natural interest came. About your sophomore year, you began to take courses in African American studies and African studies?

TO: Yes.

AP: You are graduating this June, is that right?

TO: Technically I'll be graduating this quarter, in March.

AP: Graduating March of '99. You are graduating summa cum laude, is that right?

TO: Yes.

AP: That is tremendous. Did you do a paper for your summa?

TO: I'm writing it as we speak.

AP: What is the thesis on?

TO: It's looking at the phenomenon of exile and political repression of intellectuals and artists in Africa, particularly Nigeria.

AP: That could be a dangerous topic to write.

TO: It is, but I'm framing it within ^{an international} ~~looking at a XXX~~ perspective so that it takes away that edge but at the same time I can still talk about it pretty distinctly.

AP: What are your plans for after you graduate?

TO: I did plan taking a year off because I haven't really had . . . I'm out of sync, sort of, in that I should have graduated last summer and I would have probably gotten into grad school by now. But I'm out of sync, so I think I'm going to take the year off to figure out where I want to go to grad school, but I do plan on going to grad school after that period.

AP: Are you going to work in the state?

TO: I'm already working as a teacher in the public school system.

AP: That's interesting. In St. Paul, Minneapolis?

TO: In north Minneapolis.

AP: Which school.

TO: It's an alternative high school called Hands On Academy.

AP: That's very interesting. As you look back, if you were to describe the University of Minnesota to somebody from another state, let's take a hypothetical person from Vermont, and they knew nothing about the University of Minnesota and the kind of student experience that one could have, how would you describe the university today as you've experienced it?

TO: The first thing I would say is that it's an extremely big place, and it's going to take quite a bit of maneuvering and asking questions and persistence to get through the system. The second thing I would say is that despite the hugeness of it, probably the biggest advantage is all the opportunities a student can get once they've asked questions and things like that. I think one of the biggest drawbacks with the university could be its bigness precisely because you leave that personal kind of contact with people quite a bit. You end up kind of a statistic. I think secondly, the diversity at the university is pretty hard to find. I know that a lot has been done, but it's not an attribute of the university. That's probably what I would say.

AP: Are there any funny little student customs . . . There used to be something called Big Al's in Dinkytown where people would go and have a greasy spoon breakfast or people would walk around the bridge or people would gather for coffee. Can you tell me sort of any little memories of student life that you'll look back on.

TO: I remember, as far as study nooks, those were interesting to find. I used to spend a lot of time at Espresso Royale in Dinkytown. A lot of people like that because it's a smoke-free coffee shop that was a good place to either study or socialize or meet people or anything like that. Another interesting thing and funny thing I found was just the bike culture. A lot of bikers, and you find a lot of bikes on campus. And etiquette . . . I've seen a lot of freshmen get run over first year, and it's kind of funny to see how easy you become aware of that and accepting of that.

AP: Can you explain that again? You say see a lot of freshman get run over. Do you mean literally they get run over because they're not looking?

TO: They're not looking and they don't really expect bikes to be around. They're not as cognizant of them as, I think, the rest of us are who are kind of seasoned to it.

AP: Have you tended to watch any of the sports teams?

TO: No I haven't, actually. It's not something I really ever got into, not even in high school.

AP: Have you done any student government in your last two years?

TO: No, I haven't done anything with that. I tended to do most of my activity in the community outside of the university.

AP: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

TO: I have done a lot of work with this group called CASE, and it stands for Communities Against Segregated Education. It's a support group for the NAACP lawsuit

against the public school system. Basically the lawsuit is charging the Minneapolis—and also there's one for St. Paul—with segregation, and basically not implementing the desegregation laws that were set by Brown vs. Board of Education.

AP: When you say support group, what form does that take?

TO: Basically going to the school board meetings, meeting outside of that to gain public interest in the case and also public awareness, and basically to provide any kind of support that the NAACP lawyers might need to win the case.

AP: Are there many students doing that or many people?

TO: There are several students from Macalester and a few of us from the University of Minnesota, but they are primarily parents of students in the public school system.

AP: Sounds like a very interesting volunteer experience.

TO: That was one. Right now I've been involved with a pretty left leaning organization called the Black Radical Congress. That was convened in June of last year. It's a national organization of black radicals and also just left leaning political activists. It's kind of a coalition against certain issues that the black community is interested in and has always been fighting for, sort of like a resurgence of trying to get some kind of unity and some political activism going. So that's one other group that I've also been involved with.

AP: Obviously graduating summa, you must study and be a much stronger student than practically all of your contemporaries. Have you had trouble being as successful a student? Does that make people envious or are you supported by your friends and faculty?

TO: I have quite a bit of support. A lot of people don't know that I'm graduating summa. I don't really make it a big point to stand out in that sense. I just do what I need to do. My friends have given me quite a bit of support, and also faculty has been really, really supportive of my endeavors and what my interests are and getting at things that I'd like to do. For instance, my winning the Donovan Scholarship, I won that two years ago. In 1986 I won \$7,000 to go to Nigeria to do some research. I got quite a bit of faculty support for that in letting me know that it existed and helping me get all the paperwork in and all that, and even while I was in Nigeria I got quite a bit of support. That's just an outstanding example of what I mean by faculty and faculty support.

AP: And those were the faculty members you mentioned earlier?

TO: Primarily, and also Jean Alman, who was my advisor for a while. Now John Wright is my primary advisor for my senior thesis. But I still draw on Vicky [Victoria] Coifman, Allen Isaacman, all these people to kind of hear me out, talk about grad school, talk about

what problems I might be having with the history department or some other kinds of issues. It's been a really interesting, fruitful experience for me personally.

AP: You said you got the Donovan Scholarship two years ago. Was it '96?

TO: It was in '96.

AP: Is that Professor Victoria Coifman, specialist in African Studies?

TO: Yes.

AP: Let's see if I have other questions about your experience as a student. Do you have any impressions of the administration or other aspects of life on the campus or anything else that you'd like to share?

TO: I haven't had much contact with administrative kinds of people except for financial aid/registration and things like that. It's a process. I really don't have much to say about administration except for it's been a tedious process working with them every quarter. I mean, this is just for your average student, getting paperwork in, getting the classes that you need to graduate, response time is just really . . . It's really a difficult process and it's very, very . . . I guess "red tapism" is the word to use as far as that goes. As far as other aspects of student life, I don't know what really to say other than there are tons of opportunities out there, depending on what your interests are. My interests have lied not just with being a student but with being a part of a larger community, so my focus has always been to bridge between my academic life and my social life—that's basically life outside the university. I'm really not sure if I'm that helpful with giving much of an impression on student life at the university.

AP: About how many majors are there in African, African American Studies?

TO: There are two majors in African, African American Studies, actually three. African Studies, Afro-American Studies, or you can have a bridging between the two, which is the diasporic emphasis, where you have African/African American Studies. The third one is the one I got.

AP: You had therefore both sides of the Atlantic.

TO: Yes, what they call a diasporic emphasis.

AP: And "diaspora" means . . .

TO: Diaspora is basically the dispersion of African people outside the continent. The term actually was derived from the Jewish term, which is also the same thing but it's the dispersion of people from their homeland. It's the same concept.

AP: This has been a very helpful interview. I would need one more thing from you. Could you give me your address? What I'd like to do is send you an interview permission form, which I'd like you to sign and send back to me because it's a human subjects research, and we're governed by the Human Subject Research codes, which means we should have a written consent of people. What I'd like to do is, we'll get transcribe and then it will go into the Archives as a public document, assuming that you're willing to do that.

TO: Yes.

AP: All right, so I will right down your address then.

TO: It's 16005 County Road 6, Plymouth, MN 55447.

AP: Perfect. I will send this along. It's just a one-page thing, and I'll send it along with a stamped, addressed envelope. If you have any questions, I will give you my telephone number, which is 626-1788.

TO: Okay.

AP: Thank you very much, and best of luck to you, and congratulations.

TO: Thanks.

[end of interview]