

Benedicta Maku Oral History Interview

January 5th, 2025

Interviewee: Benedicta Maku

Interviewer: Chinaza Asiegbu

Location of Interview: Roman Catholic Parish of Our Lady of Sorrows, Peckham

Biographical Note

Benedicta Maku is a pillar and a gem in the Nigerian-Catholic community of London. She holds many roles, serving tirelessly in the Chaplaincy to support religious life, youth, elders, and families through programming and pastoral care. Having lived in both London and Nigeria, she offers insight into migration, diaspora identity, and lived faith practice. She works in computer science within the UK civil service.

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Technical Note

This interview was recorded using a voice recorder in MP3 format and later transcribed. The transcript is a condensed and lightly reformatted version of the original oral recording, preserving meaning while improving clarity and readability.

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Chinaza Asiegbu: Hello, my name is Chinaza Asiegbu, and I'm conducting an oral history interview for the Nigerian Stories Archive today. The date is January 5th, 2025, and I'm with Benedicta Maku.

Benedicta Maku: My name is Benedicta Maku.

CA: Thank you so much for being here and interviewing with me. It's so nice to meet you. I just wanted to hear more about how you grew up. I know you were already speaking a little bit about how you grew up.

BM: Okay, I was born in the United Kingdom, and I was born in Kilburn, and it was not a predominantly black area. It was a mixture of Africans, Caribbeans, and the Irish people that just settled there. My father came in the 50s, and he came due to work, so he worked in the British Railways. And then my mum, she works in the hospital. So there's a hospital, St. Mary's, in Paddington. And that's where I grew up.

So I was born at home out of four of our siblings. Out of the four that were born here, so I'm the second one. So my brother and myself, we were born at home and my second youngest siblings were born in the hospital because, when I was born, I was born with the cord around my neck, and it was a home birth. So after that, my mum had all the other children in the hospital. So in the 60s, you could have the children at home.

CA: Let me see if I can get you some water.

BM: I was rushing down here. It's all good. It's all good.

CA: I can see if I can run to the store and get you some water.

BM: No, it's okay. We're good. Okay, so life in the 60s. So I was born in the 60s, so it wasn't really a predominantly black area kind of thing. So it was a mixture of Caribbeans, Irish people, and then it was, you know, the time of change, of people coming to look for work, leaving their country. So obviously my parents are Africans, Nigerians, coming to a foreign land to come work and find greener patches, as they said then, you know. So yeah, so obviously they went out to work, so both of them were working-class people. So it gave us that ethos that we had to work, we had to be educated because my dad came on a British passport, and then mum came afterwards. So the ethos was always work, you know, and be educated. And that's how most Africans and Nigerians, education is very important to them.

So coming back to my later years, so obviously went to school here, then in the 70s went back to Nigeria. '75 to be precise. Then back to Nigeria, had my secondary school education in Nigeria, and then I came back and then I started my own life here. And life here has its own challenges as well, you know, so you have to work extra hard to make sure that you got what you needed to survive, you know. And obviously, as you may come to meet me in church, faith is very important, you know. I'm a Catholic, and growing up as Catholic, you know, you mix with the different cultures as well. And the reason why I came to Nigerian chaplaincy was to meet my fellow Nigerians so that the culture will not fade away.

And the way we worship is a bit different from the English people. So we wanted a bit of dance, we wanted a bit of our music, we wanted the tradition, we wanted our prayers in our own native tongue. So that's one of the reasons why I come to the Nigerian chaplaincy, to meet my fellow Nigerians. And I wouldn't have met you if I didn't come here today, you know, so it's all about the gathering and community. When you gather together, you gather as family, you pray together, and obviously you get to know people's different circumstances. In relation to tradition, I've got the native attire on, so that keeping the tradition as well, that dressing. And obviously when we gather, we come together, we share together, and we share our experiences together. So that is the thing for me.

And in relation to work, yes, I do work with English people because obviously I'm in London, so can't really get away from that. But in relation to our culture, we sort of have different language masses as well, so which we speak our culture. So like next week Sunday, we have our various language masses that you could attend. And then we have the family mass, which we all gather, all the communities gather together, and we come, we share together, we eat together, you know. So sharing food together is a way of gathering, it's a way of worship as well, that if you sit together on the table then instead of you just being isolated, you know. So that in our Nigerian culture, we don't just come together without food, so food brings us together. Food is a community kind of thing.

But you know, if it was an Englishman, they just want to eat their own food by themselves. But we still have that ethic, that if I don't have, I can give you, we share together kind of thing. And that's the way we can grow. For instance, like there's a difference if you come to somewhere and you don't know somebody, and then you're isolated. But if you're part of a community, if anything happens, the community celebrates with you, the community cries with you, you know. But, you know, if I was just an English person, as soon as I open my door, I come in, I shut the door, you don't know what's happening to me. I don't call you. But with a community, for instance, like we have sort of like a group, a WhatsApp group, that we find out, make sure everybody's okay. If I know something, I share it kind of things. I'm not holding onto it kind of thing, yeah. So it's that culture that I've grown up with, that it's not a selfish culture kind of thing.

Yes, there's some bad stories going about our country, but we have to be in it to be able to change it. As much as I want to say to you that, oh, Nigeria is this and that, but we make up Nigeria. So regardless of what's happening, we have to be one person to stand out. One person has to be the voice. One person be able to say to you that okay, "I'm creating time." Because I've been to my mass this morning, that's my parish mass, yes, yeah, because I belong to a parish. But I'm still coming to two o'clock, so I've gone to mass already, yes. So for instance, I come in here and there was no mass. I just said, okay, I'll just have a bit quiet moment, yeah. To understand me, so you can have a quiet moment and just settle down. Just say, you know what, there might be somebody, like she said, the lady that was here, when I met her she said, "Oh

come.” I said, “You can still sit in the church and have a quiet moment.” And sometimes when you do have a quiet moment, you just can — you don’t know, just talking to someone can cheer that person up, you know. It’s not all about, yes. You know it’s not all about...

CA: Checking the box.

BM: Yeah. So you, you can, you can do it. You can evangelize in different ways, yes. And you can help people in different ways kind of thing. So yes, we’re away from our country, but you can bring your country to somewhere else, and you could make somebody smile with your own culture, with your own food, you know.

Some people just want to hear your story. How did you grow up? Was it a challenge? Yes, it has its ups and downs in the system because you have to be part of the system. And if you don’t know the system, you need to know somebody that’s already done it to be able to tell you how to do it. And some people, they just see you, and they don’t know what you’ve got. So you see me today, but you don’t know really truly who I am as Benedicta. Some people just see Benedicta, but they don’t know who Benedicta is. And if you come closer to me, then you know this person has something to bring to the table. I’m not just coming to the table, I’m bringing something to the table. And it depends on what are you bringing, what do you have to offer. And when you start talking, they’ll say, “Ooh, interesting, this person has something.” I’m not just coming to the party, I’m coming to the party to bring something, you know. And so, you know, but some Nigerians, they just want to showcase themselves.

CA: Yes.

BM: And just show that, yeah, I’ve got the big tie, big jewelry, but just some of them could be empty.

CA: And shallow.

BM: And some of them could be full. But they could bring something of joy to you. So you have to be careful as well when you’re interacting with them, and just know what distance do I want to go, and what mileage do I want to do. So you have to do a check and balance and say, “Is this for me?”

So in this country as well, there’s some people that are in Sloane, and we could take you down to, we can take a walk, yeah. So we can take you through Peckham, and you can see our culture, you can see our food and stuff.

CA: Because I’ve heard many things about Peckham.

BM: We can take a walk in a second, if it's not drizzling, and I can just take you round to Peckham, and then you can get your bus back. But it's all about community, it's all about love, you know, so people do come into the church just to have that quiet moment kind of thing.

CA: Yeah, okay.

BM: That's not the holy water.

CA: Oh, okay, yeah. But they keep some here.

BM: Yeah, yeah, so anybody who wants to have holy water, they just come, fill up their bottles and stuff.

CA: Oh, that's nice. My parish doesn't do that.

BM: Oh, everybody's parish isn't doing that? No?

CA: Mm-mm.

BM: Okay.

CA: They don't have it available. I have to talk to someone.

BM: Yes, they should have it.

CA: They have the kind when you enter a house, of course, to bless yourself, but they don't have the one that you can take with you.

BM: Yeah, every parish should have that, you see, with their little tank on the wall there. You just bring your bottle, you fill up your bottle, you bless yourself, it helps yourself.

BM: And then they provide you with chalk. When they have chalk, they give you the incense there, so you can help yourself. Okay.

CA: Yeah, our parish definitely does not do that, which is a shame.

BM: Different cultures.

CA: Different cultures. In the States, they also leave mass during the closing hymn instead of waiting until after the closing hymn is finished.

BM: Everybody has what they want, you understand? And you get your blessing, do you understand me? So you can wait until you get your final blessing, do you understand me? Yeah, I got myself involved in the sense that I don't just want to come and just be one of the ones that just comes without taking part in something. So I have that fulfillment that I teach catechism, the Holy Communion and Confirmation. And the reason why is that somebody gave me that, do you understand me? So I want to give back, you know. So if I have any knowledge, I don't want to just hold on to it. I want to be able to share it kind of thing.

So things like I read at church, I can sing, God's blessed me with different gifts. I help, you know, the formation in the church, you know. And the more you do, there's a blessing that comes with it. There's a prayer as well that says that if you serve in the church, there is a blessing. Yeah, there is a blessing. Some people just come, they welcome you with that little smile. They hand you a hymn book and a mass book when you come into mass. That is the ministry. And then there's some people that come and just sweep the church. That is the ministry. So don't think that you're not — God sees it. God sees it, and God will bless you to say, "Oh, you're keeping mine, you're keeping my church going."

Like during the pandemic, there were some people that didn't come to mass, but there's some people that just kept on coming because, excuse me, during that pandemic, we had to clean the church. It was more sanitizing and cleaning, and we had our face masks on. But God was faithful, do you understand?

CA: Amen.

BM: So yeah, as such, God is going to continue to be faithful. You just have to trust in him, you know? And then, yeah.

CA: Yeah, I was curious, when you were in Nigeria, was the Catholic Church different than it was here? It was secondary school, so I know it was.

BM: Well, Catholic Church was different in the sense that it was more disciplined. You had to come to church and listen. You don't just come here. We've got a bit more watered down kind of how we do things. We have to be...

CA: Accessible? Is that the word?

BM: Well, not really. Accessible, yes. But Nigeria too, they're accessible. But due to culture, there's certain things we will not say. We're a bit scared. We wouldn't say this to a priest, or we won't just approach a priest like that. But here, the priests are more relaxed, you know. We're not frightened to go to them. But Nigeria, there's all this hierarchy, you know, and you have to make sure that you go through this hierarchy before you get to them.

CA: And I'm sure you're more aware because even here, I feel like even knowledge of the hierarchy doesn't exist as much for normal parishioners.

BM: No, no, not so much.

(Someone entered the room: "Hello! I'm looking for holy water.")

Yeah, so people are coming to get their holy water.

(Person in the room: "Sister! I have a little water with me, come share with me.")

Hello! For the church to be open, not all churches are open like this, you know. Some churches are locked.

CA: They lock up after mass, or a few hours after.

BM: Yeah, but the thing is, because there's cameras here, there's sensors here, and in some parishes they have to lock it because thieves come.

CA: Oh no!

BM: Yeah, and they steal, like, there's some churches they've stolen their speakers and stuff like that. You can hear, they've got cameras everywhere kind of thing, so yeah. Because people don't, they don't respect church. Before, you would be scared to go into church and steal something from church. But here, you know, so...

CA: Things have changed, yeah.

BM: Things have changed with time, so there are cameras.

CA: Do you think... Because I'm really interested in religious life, especially in the Nigerian diaspora, because I feel like there's a rich history there, and when I went to mass in Nigeria, it felt so different.

BM: It is different.

(Someone else in the room: "So I was where...")

Unless you were going to invite me to come to one of the cultural masses. Well, I'll add some of the sisters. If you can go to the Igbo Mass, which is in North London, and that's at 2 o'clock maybe, that's this Sunday, so you can attend, see where — you can see your culture, the Igbo people kind of thing. I'll freeze it, I'll get their address. So tomorrow, remind me, remind me tomorrow so we can get their address, so you can just go and see how the Igbo culture mass is.

CA: Yeah, I wonder too, did you know you were going to come back to London after secondary school?

BM: No, it's just, yeah, I've seen different things. So the Epiphany water is that you have to use it to bless each room, apparently. Yeah, I learnt something new today.

CA: I learned something new too. My dad would fill spray bottles with the water, so when I moved into uni, he would spray the room. So I was thinking about it as a technological innovation.

BM: Yeah, it's the culture because that's what we believe in, do you understand me? Like the Holy Spirit come, and we've called down the Holy Spirit, you know. And that's for instance, like with time, as you grow up, you want to understand a bit more. And when you were younger — when I was younger — I did go to mass, but because I loved reading as well, I've always inspired that I'm going to be on that lectern, I'm going to read one day. And it happened. And I loved the hymns. I love singing. Like when I was sitting there, I've opened the hymn book, I can tell you certain hymns that just come to mind kind of thing, you know. So yeah. And we have obviously the Nigerian Catholic hymn book, so there's some hymn book hymns that are not in the normal hymns, that are traditional ones that we use in Nigeria as well. So we do have a Catholic hymn book as well.

But in relation to growing up, it's good to have both, to have knowledge of both cultures. And for me, that gave me my foundation as well. So I was quite happy that I had the Nigerian culture and I had the British culture. So I could sort like — my parents made sure that before we moved from here to Nigeria, that we knew what we were expecting. But the only thing for me was I'm left-handed, yeah, and I had a problem before going to Nigeria because my parents wanted to change my writing to move to right-handed. And that was a problem for me, yeah, because in Nigeria you don't give people something with your left hand. It took me a while with a lot of — so if I wanted to give you something, I'll just draw back because, oh my God, I've forgotten, yeah. And then there was one day I wanted to buy the Sanko, which is like an ice cream drink in Nigeria, and I was stretching my hand and I was waiting to be served kind of thing. And my mom was waiting for me, and she now came to where the man was, and he goes, "Who does she think she wants to give something with that left hand?" You know, and to me as a child, I was I think about 10-something, going 11. And I didn't even know that that was the reason why because I'd had the money and I was like stretching, stretching the hand to give him the money, and he wouldn't take it. And I was just like, "Like, you know, what's happening? What's happening?"

So for me, the handwriting, they tried, but the school now said, "Look, Benedicta cannot change her handwriting now." You know, there's some people that are strong with their left, and

if you do anything with your left hand, that's where my power is, you know. So yeah, so my left hand is my power. But Nigerian culture-wise, you don't give people things with your left hand kind of thing, yeah.

CA: So then when you went for secondary school, was it a problem?

BM: No, I used my left because I couldn't change, yeah. They tried, but it didn't happen. You know, like something — and if you ask some Nigerians, their parents made them change hands, but it didn't work. So I am a left-handed person. I work with my left hand. All my actions are with my left hand because that's where your strength is.

CA: That's not part of the reason why you came back to London, is it?

BM: No, no, no, no, no, no. The reason why I came back to London, there was just like opportunities to go back to because I wanted to do computer science, and there wasn't really much happening in Nigeria then, yeah. So my parents just said yeah.

CA: So you do computer science here?

BM: Yeah.

CA: Wow, okay.

BM: My parents were easygoing, although they took a while, because I finished secondary school in 1982. It took another three years for them to be convinced that I wasn't going to study in Nigeria. So because they, as a girl, they didn't want to allow me because girls are meant to get married, and didn't set me back.

CA: Oh, in the 80s, it was still like that.

BM: Yeah, for some parents, the culture doesn't change. Some people, even though they do live abroad — there's some people here that live abroad, but you would still think that they're living back home still, yeah. So I came back here, worked a bit, went to school, and I ended up now — I've worked in the government department now. This is my thirty-third year.

CA: Wow, praise God.

BM: So I've worked in the department, so if I told you that I've worked in the government department, you probably wouldn't have...

CA: No, I wouldn't have known.

BM: You would have thought of something else, yeah. What type of profession would you have thought I would be in?

CA: Um, what would I think? I would think a teacher because you have a kind spirit.

BM: Yeah, so I do teach, but not as a professional teacher. But I can teach because the three years that I stayed at home, I sort of like taught children mathematics.

CA: I'm sure you're a good teacher because you have that kind instructor...

BM: I thank God that I — for instance, for my parish, I'm the parish lead. So what that means is that I'm the head of catechism, education, and sacraments. And then when we do have diocesan meetings, I represent my parish and stuff.

CA: Oh okay, so it comes out, and then also catechism, teaching, and everything.

BM: Yeah, and then obviously in the chaplaincy, I was part of the communication team. So anything to do with our communication for the chaplaincy, I was part of that as well.

CA: So you use your gifts all around, like your technical gifts?

BM: You have to. If not, it's wasted, yeah. So you have to. For instance, if God gives you a gift, what are you doing with it? You can't just hold on to it and not do nothing with it, yeah. If you don't do anything, it goes away.

CA: Yeah, it does. Wow, this is—what a great life. So you're born here in 1964, you went back, you came back in... was it 1985?

BM: Yeah.

CA: Wow, and then you've lived here and you've worked and gone — this is amazing.

BM: So I have that commitment, you know, when you work in a certain place that shows that you are the committed person, you understand, because some people choose to move from job to job, you know. And some people stay at certain jobs that they can grow and make other people grow as well. So if I have to look back to change anything, would I change anything? Not really, yeah. I'm happy, I'm fulfilled, so God has been faithful.

CA: Amen, praise God.

BM: So you want to walk down, yeah?

CA: Thank you so much for talking with me!

CA: As an addendum to the interview, I wanted to include some additional context that me and Benedicta spoke about before her formal interview began. So her dad worked for the rail service back when African immigrants were just coming to Britain, and her mother worked for a hospital. Back then, when they had initially moved to Britain, Irish immigrants were considered minorities, but then an influx of Africans came into Britain ready to work, and it changed the dynamics there.

As Benedicta and I were walking through Peckham after our interview, we walked past the Peckham Library, and she also informed me about the death of Damilola Taylor several decades back that greatly impacted the Nigerian community in Peckham. I just would be remiss without including these details into the interview. Thank you all so much.