

## Juliet Egbunike Oral History Interview

February 4, 2024

**Interviewee:** Juliet Egbunike

**Interviewer:** Dawn Abiakalam

**Location of Interview:** Zoom

### Biographical Note

Juliet Egbunike is a Nigerian-born early years educator currently living in the diaspora. She was educated in Nigeria from nursery through university and has professional experience in education. Her reflections focus on Nigerian music, arts, and cultural life, both in Nigeria and in the diaspora, with particular attention to generational change, cultural identity, and the global rise of Afrobeats.

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### Technical Note

This interview was conducted remotely via Zoom and recorded in digital audio format. The recording was subsequently transcribed and lightly edited for clarity and readability. This transcript preserves the content and meaning of the original interview while correcting minor transcription errors and formatting inconsistencies.

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**Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam:** Hello, my name is Dawn. My name is Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam, and I'm conducting an oral history interview for the Nigerian Stories Archive. Today is Sunday, the 4th of February, and I am currently with... okay, so you can introduce yourself now.

**Juliet Egbunike:** Okay, Juliette Mbunike, Mrs.

**DCA:** I would like to start by thanking you for joining me. So, we're going to begin by just getting some general information about you. So, whatever you feel comfortable sharing regarding, like, your family, you know, where you went to school, where you're from in Nigeria, if you'd like to tell me a little about this.

**JE:** Okay, well, first of all, I'm married with four children, and I'm an early years educator. And I went to school from my nursery to primary to university in Nigeria. And yes, basically that's all I can think of now. Yeah.

**DCA:** So, the focus of our interview today is actually going to be, like, on music, art, and culture. And I'd just like to know more about your personal experiences interacting with the arts in Nigeria. You know, notable things you remember from your childhood and even now.

**JE:** Okay, for my childhood, I remember in school we were taught about the history of Nigeria, which I came to learn, I think a few months ago, that is no longer taught in secondary school, sadly. And I came to know about the Nok culture, the Tara culture, the beautiful ancient artifacts we have in Nigeria. I learned those in secondary school. And, of course, when I was growing up, we were exposed to all genres of music: Afrobeats, high life. We had Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, we had Osadebe, Oliver de Coque, coming from my part of Nigeria, which is the eastern region. And I was also exposed to Yoruba juju music by Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obe, of blessed memory, and so many traditional artists. And that kind of formed my kind of, I would say, worldview of Nigeria and the world in general, really, and to appreciate cultures and music from other groups and other tribes and other races. It started from being exposed to this kind of different music, I would say, more familiar to me by the kind of music my parents played, which was Osadebe most of the time. Yes, so yes.

**DCA:** Yeah, and so when you think about specifically, like, your time in university, do you think about any specific trends that were popular with, like, music or just things that were popular in the culture of Nigeria? And when you think about that time and think about now, do you see any similarities? Do you see any differences? Just what are your general thoughts on that?

**JE:** Okay, during my time in university, I must say that we were more appreciative of traditional music, you know, music from Nigeria and ethnic music. Ethnic music, like, I remember then we used to invite Sunny Ade to come, you know, and play during graduations, and we were in awe of him. We, you know, and we were just, we embraced our culture more, I would say, during my time. And also, there was more of a community life. I don't know what university is like now. I'm not in university now, but from what I hear, it's like every man to himself. Like now, when I was in university, I had friends from Edo State. I had friends from the North. I had

friends from the West. You know, almost all ethnic groups. I had Calabar friends. You know, there was no segregation or, you know, tribalism, if I must say. So it was really, really, really nice.

And, of course, wearing Iro and Buba, which is traditional Yoruba outfit, was just second nature to me, even as a young girl, because my mother used to make, you know, traditional wears for us. And I had the Fulani wear. I had Iro and Buba wear in Ankara. It was just not only traditional wears, you know, of my own ethnic group, yeah, or ethnicity, if I must say. I had, I mean, my wardrobe was full of things. So it was just that now I don't see, really, I don't see other young people from other tribes really wearing, you know, traditional outfits from other tribes, which during my time was quite common. You wouldn't even know until you hear the person's name. "Oh, so you're Igbo, you know?" So, yeah.

**DCA:** Yeah. So you think that the cultures were more unified back then than they are now?

**JE:** Yes, definitely.

**DCA:** Do you have any thoughts on why you think that there's that difference and that separation now compared to before?

**JE:** I think it has to do with the fact that, for me personally, history was erased from the curriculum, and I think our leaders also were using divide and rule. Due to corruption, you divide them, you rule them better. You know, making one ethnic group feel they are higher than the other. So tribalism was subtly implanted in the minds of the people. I think that's basically what really happened, in my own opinion.

**DCA:** Yeah, that makes sense. And, like now, in your position as a Nigerian in the diaspora, how would you say your interaction with Nigerian art and music and just, you know, cultural life has evolved over time, being that you are a Nigerian person that doesn't live in Nigeria?

**JE:** Well, I'll say that I unfortunately play less Nigerian music now. For whatever reason, I don't know. But, like now, when I was in Nigeria, like playing Nigerian music in my car, playing it at home was okay. But now I found out that now I'm in the diaspora, I play Nigerian music when I'm low, when I feel homesick, you know, or when I'm not feeling too happy. So I want to get a connection to home, and I just go to my music library, and like two days ago, I was playing Ebenezer Obey, *The Man and His Horse*. He's late, and he was a very great Yoruba artist. Yes, and I was just playing it, and he took me back to my childhood. He took me back to Nigeria and some artists from, you know, the eastern region. Unfortunately, I don't just wake up in the morning on weekends and say, "oh, I want to play Nigerian music." I find that I yearn for it most times when I'm just not feeling okay, and I want to lift up in my spirit, yes.

**DCA:** Yeah, that makes sense, and I think that's a very natural feeling to have because it's like sometimes just hearing the language and reminiscing on the sounds, it can make you feel like

you're at home again. And this also makes me just think about, like, what do you think, like Nigerian music? I feel like Nigerian music has gone through lots of phases. Like, you had, like, the phase of, like, William Onyeabor, and then you had, like, the whole, like, Fela, you know, type of era. And so if you, like, think back to your childhood, like, do you think that, like, at different points in time Nigerian music has demonstrated different things and represented different things to Nigerians? And if you do, like, what are your thoughts about that and the evolution of arts and just music in Nigeria as a whole?

**JE:** I'll say that the evolution that Nigerian music has taken is not really a very good one, in the sense that the lyrics or the themes of some of the songs, even though you listen to Afrobeats by some very popular artists, mostly talking about very shallow things like money and women and not really deep. Like, you find Fela talking about the regime then, the military regime, and the roles of an average Nigerian. Every Nigerian could connect to it. But from the ones I listen to now, not every Nigerian can connect to some of the songs that's coming out from Nigeria, especially from the very popular artists, you know, because not every Nigerian can relate to having so much money or going to club and popping champagne of ₦120,000 a bottle, you know?

**DCA:** Yes.

**JE:** So that's the sad part. The beat, I'll say, is very good. The beat just is very good. But the lyrics, you know, during my time, there was so much deep meaning to the songs, you know, and almost everybody from ethnical could relate to it. So that's just what I've observed compared to my time when I was growing up in Nigeria.

**DCA:** Yeah, and it's interesting that you mentioned, you know, this thing that you've noticed, because it seems that in history in general, this is the time in our history when Nigerian music has been the most popular, at least globally. And so I was wondering, like, what do you, like, do you have any thoughts towards how popular Nigerian music has become and is becoming, and how does that make you feel as a Nigerian to know that the music that, know, people from your country make is so prominent on the world stage and, like, so popular?

**JE:** Oh yes, it makes me very, very proud. If I'm to say very, very proud, very proud. I feel they are doing very well, you know, being on the world stage with other artists from the Western world, which makes me very proud, I must say. The thing, yeah, well, just I'll, I just wish there were more songs with a lot of deep meanings. That's all. The licks are good. And, you know, I think it just has to, the world at large actually affects the way some of these artists produce their music, because they want something that can sell, you know. Alcohol sells, half-nude girls and love and romance, all those things sell. So you can't blame them, you know. So I'll just say, with all that, I'm really, really proud of the way they were able to hit the world stage and

everybody from every tribe and the beat, you know, the Afro juju beat, you know, the beats, other cultures appreciating it. So I'm really proud. I'm really proud. I'm proud. Yeah.

**DCA:** And then when you look at the future, are there any hopes you have for Nigerian music? I don't know if this is something you know about, but there was a time there used to be like, this festival in Festac. I think it was called, like, Festac '77 or something like that, where, like, a bunch of, like, African musicians would come to Nigeria. And I personally have noticed that over time, even though our production of music has really increased, the way we experience music is really changing. So I think about, like, highlife music and, like, how live performances are very central to experiencing highlife music. And just thinking about how people don't really experience music like that anymore. So do you have any, like, thoughts on that or why you think that has happened and, like, what you think might be in the future or just your general thoughts on that?

**JE:** So far with you, I don't think. I think the future will be more of electronic music, more of, when I say electronic, it means more of just people, like, either listening through their media devices or, how do I put it now, just listening through their media devices. For example, during my time, we used to go to live bands in Surulere. There were live bands in Festac, and you just watch these artists, you know, sing, and you just feel a deep connection to them, you know, like a personal connection. Uh, I don't think that's quite, that is common now. Except when they hold a huge concert and you have thousands of people, you don't only feel that connection. I don't anyway. I went once, and I didn't feel anything. I just felt on a high, you know. When you have this adrenaline rush, after the high comes down, you just go home, you know?

So, yeah, but I don't think it will ever go back to the way it was, which was a more personal experience. You could also go on stage, dance with the artist, and just feel a deep connection. You know that everything is not really planned to the T as far as when the artist comes out, this is when he or she, he, for example, a man throws his shirts and people hold their phone with the touchlight and waving. I just feel, I don't know. It's like, it doesn't give, from what I experienced, the feeling is quite different. I don't think we're going back. I don't think we're going to go back to that more humane way of appreciating music and the artists and feeling the connection, yeah. I must give the Nigerian artists, they are doing a very good job. I don't know what the future might hold, but I don't think we'll go back to the way it was, sadly. Yes, yes, sadly.

**DCA:** And then, like you, do you have any personal experiences of contributing, like just to the arts in general, like in your own life? Have you ever, like, contributed to the arts or, like, been somebody who found yourself in any artistic spaces?

**JE:** Oh yeah, actually I did paint. I used to paint when I was a teenager, but not in terms of art, not music, not art as music. Yes, yeah, I used to paint. I actually have a portrait in my house. I

painted when I was 18. And I remember one of my, my daughters, Naomi, this morning was just telling me, “Mom, why didn't you bring that artwork to Canada?” When I look at the artwork, I'm like, “How can you have painted such a masterpiece at 18?” you know? I was like, “you should go back.” So, you know, I said, “maybe I'll use this as therapy.” Right now, I don't know if I still have it. She's like, “It's always in you, just go back,” you know? Yeah, that's the only way I did it.

And I used to paint and gift those paintings to my family members because then I was just 18. I didn't have money. So the way I could give my brothers and my father then like gifts on their birthdays was to paint and just give it to them. And they were always very grateful to appreciate it with those things. So, yeah, that's the only way, not, it was just within my family, yes. And, of course, choir, yes, which I am now, even in Canada, you know. I used to love to go to the choir in Nigeria to sing, and I appreciate listening to other people sing. It just takes you to a different heaven, you know, so, yes.

**DCA:** Yeah, I think that's very interesting because I do believe that Nigerians are quite artistic as a people. So I find that usually when I ask people this question, they have contributed in some ways. Thank you for that answer. I don't have any more questions, but I was wondering if there was anything else you would like to share or any of your extra thoughts you had regarding the subject of the interview?

**JE:** Okay, no, no. I'm very, in terms of art, you know, Nigeria is a very rich country in terms of, like, food, clothing, dance, music. We're very rich, and I just hope that for future generations, and you know, to come, that it's —the history of Nigeria, the way we were taught in school there in secondary school, and the beauty of the Nigerian, you know, clothings from every ethnic group, will be taught again to the younger generation. So they know that, yeah, will be taught again to the younger generation, and the music of those of old, even though most of them are late now, can be, you know, played, you know. It starts from the home, you know, and, like, if parents can be playing those songs, because I remember I'm Igbo, but I know I listened to Osadebe, I listened to Ebenezer Obey, you know, and I listened to some other music. I really don't know their name, but my father used to play that every Saturday. And then, of course, all the music from other cultures, South Africa, Mariam Makeba, Hugh Masekela. I was listening to those music. So, but unfortunately now, I don't know, I don't know.

So if parents can start from the home and expose their children to different genres of music, and expose them to the different cultural advantages we have in Nigeria, not just to the ones that is just specific to them, it should really help to broaden the mind of the younger generation. And maybe hopefully in the future, we will be able to make what we have now better. You know, we could have now better. So that's just basically what I have to say.

**DCA:** Yeah, thank you so much. And thank you again for taking out this time to join me. I really, really appreciate your contribution to the Nigerian Stories Archive. Thank you so, so much.

**JE:** All right, thank you. Bye.

**DCA:** Thank you, bye.