

Interviewee: Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai

Interviewer: Jessica Smith

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S:This morning I will be interviewing Dr. Olabiyi Yai. He is the department chair of the African and Asian Languages and Literature Department in Grinter Hall. His office is located in 471 Grinter Hall. Dr. Yai, could you please state your full name?

Y:My name is Olabiyi Babalola Yai. My middle [name], as you recall here, is not a middle [name]. It is also a first name. It is Babalola.

S:Okay. When and where were you born?

Y:I was born on twelfth of March of the year 1939 after Jesus Christ in Shabe, which is in Yorubaland, the capital city of the Shabe Kingdom. The Shabe Kingdom happens to be divided now between Nigeria and Benin but it is still one kingdom. The capital city of Shabe, IleShabe, happens to be on the French side of the French and British divide.

S:What is the name of your father and his occupation, or what did he do?

Y:The name of my father is Ashipa, which if translated would be "pioneer," "he who opened the way," something like that. He also was baptized as Aquilas, a Christian name, but his African name is Ashipa. Alao is his oriki, his second name

or middle name, Ashipa Alao. He was a farmer. That is the main occupation of many people in my area. [He was also] a trader. He used to go from Shabe to Lagos to Abbeokuta. In those days, a bike was like a truck in the twenties and thirties of this century. So he was mainly a farmer. Everyone, even if you were anything else, [was] a farmer. You did not buy your food, particularly as a prince, [which] he was. And in addition to that he was also a trader. He used to trade in cloth and gun powder between Nigeria and Dahomey at the time. He also used to trade in bikes and bike parts between Nigeria and the Benin Republic.

S:How long did he do that? How long was he a trader as well as a farmer?

Y:He did that until the early fifties. I was already big enough. I saw it. I saw it myself. He did that until maybe 1954 or thereabout. And then he passed it to one of his nephews and did not do it anymore. I would have done it also if I had not gone to school. But as you know, I went to school.

S:Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your mother--her name, what she did, and what type of family she was from?

Y:My mother is Ilesamin, her African name. Ada is her Christian name. [It is] her Old Testament name because she was baptized. By profession she is like many Yoruba women. [She was] a trader. In other words, those things her husband brought from the long distance between Shabe and

Lagos, or Ibadan, or Abbeokuta, she would kind of distribute it, sell it in the local market. In addition to being a homemaker, as you say here, she was also a petty trader. She used to sell clothes, cotton, woolen clothes in the traditional Yoruba aso, as we call it. [She sold] imported print clothes as well and things like plates, china, spoons. All those things my father would bring also from Nigeria at the time and she would resell it on the market. She is the daughter of a very famous diviner. My family and my grandfather and great-grandfather in that line were diviners, babalawo diviners. She is the first to be a Christian in the family. At least three of my granduncles were also diviners. So divination is a trait in the family.

S:Do you know when she became a Christian?

Y:I really do not know. She must have been converted to Christianity, maybe in the middle of the twenties or in the early thirties. [She was converted] definitely before I was born.

S:Do you have any siblings?

Y:In the strict American sense of it I do not, since I was the only child of both my father and mother. I must say though that my father had a son fifteen years before I was born by another woman who befriended him. He was not married at the time, but the son died long before I was born. So I had a half-brother whom I did not know. But I know his name was

Oladogun. I know because if you have a brother in your family you must know. Or a sister. But apart from that, I have, of course, many siblings in the sense of those in my family whom I would call brother and sister. But in terms of family terminology, [they would be called] nephews [or nieces]. I did not have blood sisters or brothers in the strict sense of it, but I did have a lot of them in the definition that we apply in my culture.

S:So I guess what we would consider cousins, you would consider siblings?

Y:Oh, yes, definitely yes.

S:Did you all go to school together?

Y:No, because of my generation. I think I am the only one who went to school. You must understand that those were the thirties. There still was resistance, mostly cultural resistance, to colonialism. School was seen with suspicion because you went, almost invariably, to a Christian mission school which meant you were obliged to convert to Christianity [and] abandon your own religion. And the last thing someone from the royal family would do is abandon his traditions. Those who were four or five years older than me in the family did [not] go to school. [My grandfather] did not want them to go to school because he did not want them to become Christians or anti-traditional. I, reluctantly, was the one who was sent to school reluctantly by my

grandfather. But he made sure I was well groomed at home before I went to school. Many of my siblings, in the African sense of it, went to school five or six years after me. But I was the only one to really go to school in that area. Before that, I was like some kind of experiment.

S:To what type of school did you go?

Y:I first went to a missionary school, a Methodist school, run by a Methodist mission. In that area they were patterned on Nigerian schools. In other words, you have to learn your language, which in my case was Yoruba, for two to three years, before you went to study an official language which in my case was French. My father tried to send me to the official French school, but I was too short and therefore was thought to be too young. I was sent back. Indeed, when I did enter school the local district officer caught cut my age three years. I was nine years old at the time, [but] he [wrote down that I was] six.

I was officially born in 1942 instead of being born in 1939. I did not know because my mother and father were illiterate. When I was born, they knew that I was born in 1939. Because I was not born in a hospital or official maternity, the white administrator did not want me to be as old as I was. He arbitrarily gave me an age. So I went to that missionary school. I learned Yoruba and to write first on the floor, then on the boards. [I learned] how to write and to read

Yoruba. Then, at the age of nine or ten, I went to the French official school. I proceeded to high school in the capital, the territory there which was Porto Novo.

S:What was the name of the first school that you went to, your primary school?

Y:The primary school was the Protestant Methodist School of Shabbe. You can spend two or three years there, then you went to only French elementary or primary education school. I went there. It was called the Regional School because it catered to the whole region, not just for Shabbe City. It was a regional school, the elementary school, [and] it went from first to sixth grade. I graduated from there with what would then have been a certificate for graduation from primary school. It is called in French "Certifique de Tut Premier." I got it in 1953. Yes, I remember that. Well, I was proud to be the first in the whole region who graduated. We were ranked, not just graduated. In the whole region, and the region was big, I [was ranked number one]. I was the first.

S:How many students were there? Were there hundreds of students or just [a few]?

Y:In the region?

S:Yes, in your school from which you graduated.

Y:Okay. In the school I graduated from, there were 200 [students] from the first year to the sixth year. [There

were] 200 to a few hundred at most. Now in the whole region there were at least four or six more towns with the same status with the regional school. These schools were graded, and maybe there were 500 to 1,000 candidates, at least at the examination and certificate. [The certificate was called] the Certificate of End of Primary Studies. That gave you the right to proceed on to high school. That certificate certified that you completed those studies. But you still have to go through another examination to get into the classical high school. It is typical. Classical high school is very much a typical, lycée, French lycée.

S:Okay. So in order to get out of primary school, you had to take an exam first?

Y:Yes.

S:Then you received your certificate, and then you had to take another exam to get into high school?

Y:Yes. In the same year, yes.

S:Oh.

Y:It was not just an exam, it was competitive. It was not that you must have a certain average. In the whole territory, the whole colony, [there were] only 120 vacancies. If you were 121, even if your average was a B-plus, you would not enter the school. They had only one such classical high school for men and one for girls in the colony of Dahomey. That was a different examination. It was not an exam in the

sense that [in] the French session we would call it conque, not exam. An exam gave you a certificate, but that one gave you access to the classical lycée or high school. But on the basis of being very competitive you are selected. It is very, very, very, elitist to say the truth. I can see it even more now.

S:So it was an entrance test in order . . .

Y:It was an entrance test, but there was a limited number of people who could enter the lycée at that time.

S:So you entered high school in 1953?

Y:Yes, I entered high school in October 1953, and that was six, seven years of high school. I was in the boarding house for seven good years at the Lycée Victor Colonne. Victor Colonne was the first French governor of that colony, and the high school was named after him. And I graduated from the high school with what the French called baccalauréat. It still exists today. In June 1960, just before Independence, [I graduated from high school]. Those were the years [when] you had French teachers. All our programs depended on Bordeaux Academy in France. Our textbooks, exams, timetable, came from the academy of Paris or Bordeaux. In other words, at the same time people in France were studying biology, we were studying biology in the colony. As you would expect, the French were very, very much standardized. [They had] the same textbooks, same

program, [and] of course, the same exams from France to the colonies.

S:What subjects did you study?

Y:Well, there were two branches, what they called modern and what they called the classics. I was in the classics. In other words, you studied mostly humanities. Of course, French is a must, French language and literature. [I also studied] Latin, Spanish, and then geography, history and biology, mathematics, of course, all the time but they are not as stressed. They did not carry the weight they carried in the so-called modern branches. There is a classics and humanities branch and then there is the scientific branch. In the scientific branch, deeper mathematics and physics carried more weight. But for us, you not afford less than a C-plus in French or else you would never graduate in the classic arm track. So I followed that one. Therefore, [I studied] Latin, French and languages, English included, of course.

S:Did you choose that or were you tracked into the classical or modern branch because of test scores?

Y:Well, I think if you have a higher test score in the classics, of course, you would be encouraged to be in the classics. But we did have a choice. If you did not do well in the score, if [out of] 120, you were 110 or 111, your teachers at the time would be reluctant to take you into classes

because they believed that if you are not bright you cannot do Latin. That was their belief. I believe they were wrong. Whether I am right or not, that is what they believed, and therefore they would orient you toward the classics if you were among the first, etcetera. I wanted to do Latin. I want to do Latin and languages.

S:Why?

Y:Why?

S:Yes.

Y:Well, out of curiosity and also I believe maybe because I always had wanted to go to a school where you learned to how to be a great poet, to write. But there was no such school in the French system. My background in the home of my grandfather was training in traditional world view and oral poetry, etcetera. So I [became] interested in the humanities. I was not necessarily interested in mathematics. I was not good in mathematics, but I did not cultivate it either. I wanted to learn more about languages, literature.

Also, I was conscious of the fact that part of our people were in Nigeria and that some of my cousins learned English. I wanted to learn the language of the whites who colonized my cousins on the other side. So it is no accident at all. Since my father went to Ibadan, [he would] come back with Yoruba books with some things in English I could not read.

I did not understand. I wanted to know that language, that bizarre language that is English. Those were my reasons to go into rather literary matters, the literature and humanities track of the secondary high school education at the time. And this I did until 1960 when I completed my baccalauréat there.

S:After you finished your baccalauréat what did you do?

Y:Well, at that time I was encouraged by my professors to go to France to a highly specialized school called the _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**) which molded you to become a teacher and later on, a professor. But I did not want that. At that time I already was revolting against French colonialism. I knew that at a school you were conditioned to be very highly qualified but stay a very establishment kind of scholar which was exactly what I did not want to be. I was very interested in political science, but the French would not give me a scholarship for it. They wanted me to do humanities, languages--Spanish or French and English. Then I decided to do Spanish. But not through the channel of the _____ where you were conditioned and you would go and pair with the agrégation. I knew that if you did it, you could not be a patriot as I was at the time. I was for independence, therefore against French colonialism. You cannot hold those ideas and at the same time go to those

schools. It is contradictory. They will fail you all the time.

I decided to go to a normal, classical university and do humanities and particularly languages, philosophy and Spanish. Anyone who wants to move freely and communicate in this world must know English, but I did not want that to be my specialty. I wanted another language, that is why I chose Spanish and Latin American studies. Then I went to Dakar for my first university. I registered for many things, particularly humanities, philosophy, English, and Spanish. I was attending some lectures in the school of economics. But I abandoned that after one semester because they were not teaching me the what I expected so that I could understand the economic situation of Africa at the time. I concentrated on humanities and languages.

S:What were they focusing on in the economics department? Was it more the economics of the colonial powers?

Y:Yes, we were told of how capitalist economics worked. But what I wanted was some instrument, some knowledge, which would help me understand the African economic system, pre-colonial and colonial as well. After a very short survey of the economic system, they would present you with one hour with what the socialist economy was supposed to be. Everything there is concentrated on modern enterprenuerialship, etcetera, which you do not find in the colonies anyway. It

did not help me understand how the colonialist economic system functions and definitely less how the pre-colonialist system worked and how both are articulated. I thought I could not learn from that and really understand unless I study other things by myself. I could not do that through a degree, and it was too much work to add to the humanities, which was my main focus. So I abandoned that after the first semester.

S:Were most of the professors that you had Dakar as well as in your high school Africans or French?

Y:About 90 percent of them were Europeans, of course. As far as I remember, I think I had only four professors in high school [who were African]. Two of them were not even permanent, they just came to replace other people. They were not faculty. They came to help. Most of them, of course, were French people.

S:What did they expect you to do even though you had gone through the same system as Europeans and had acquired the same knowledge? What did they make available for you to do if Europeans were keeping all of the educational positions for themselves?

Y:Do not forget that those were years when the French never thought that African countries would become independent one day anyway. So they expected us to be excellent, good citizens of France. We were kind of overseas French people,

French citizens. They expected us to become good French Africans. Indeed, many of them groomed us and wanted to send us to France to prove to the counterparts in France that we they could raise Africans as good as any French person. We would also believe that of course, we believed that we could. Since we were going through the same exams, we were doing really as good, if not better than French people in France. The expectation of the French until the last year of 1960, when it became clear that independence was inevitable, was that we would be French-educated citizens. That was what [we were] bombarded with everyday, "you must be a good French citizen." Ancestry was supposed to be the goal of the French. We were taught like any French citizen from Paris, or from Lille, or from _____ **(PLEASE IDENTIFY)** or from Marseilles, or any village in France for that matter. At that time if you were good French citizen, [you could be] a French diplomat who could work in Africa as well as anywhere in France if you were really good. It was clear to me already in my fourth or fifth year in high school seeing where we were with the movement, the Algerian War, the war in Indochina, and the French empire being threatened and contested everywhere, I was sure Africa could not become just another French Africa. I knew this. Those were the expectations of the French. But most of us had a different expectation. Some believed

in these also, I must confess. Some of us believed that we could become [good French citizens]. Everything, the uniforms, everything we were taught, conditioned us to become good black French people. I must say that in a way that was very efficient because today if you see from my generation even though they do not have a French passport, they are not leaving France, type of consumption is French, this type of life is French. We have kept this allegiance to the French system. So in a way, this assimilation was successful to a certain extent. Instead let me tell that the current president of France, Francois Mitterrand, came to my high school once. He was then minister of colonies and talked to us in _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**). Good French admired him at the time. His manner then was very, very, very stylish. And we admired that. He wanted to know the percentage of students who were not children of functionaries, or people who were from peasant families and were not men at the time. After he talked to us, he asked who [of us] were of peasant background or famine background. Well, I am not sure how many of us were, maybe we were seventy-five or eighty. But the objective of the colony was to extend France in Africa, which included making the men and women good French people.

S:Did most of the people who came through with you end up being the elite in Nigeria?

Y:Yes, yes, definitely yes. Of course, as I told you, I became an undergraduate the very year we became independent, and that was in 1960. Therefore, my generation, my set, were the very first [elites]. Those who came after us already spent most of their school years in continuing independence in an independent state. I was in Dakar first, and then in France on a scholarship from the French government. We were the very first set who were independent. Those who graduated after four or five years, 1964 or 1965, went back. At the time, we had very few peers. We were first to occupy those important positions left by the colonialists. In other words, whether I liked it or not, I was part of the elite. They occupied the state university positions. But I chose to be in a different function by learning and teaching. I resisted the natural temptation of politics. Many, many became politicians and became ministers in such and such important positions even though their specialty did not prepare them for that. If you are a member of the elite, you could be anything. You could hold any position of power. A medical doctor could be, for instance, a minister for education and not for health or head of economics or whatever. If you have a university degree, you could do anything, that could predispose you to any kind of expertise.

S:How did going to Dakar, with [Nigeria] becoming independent at the same time, affect your education?

Y:Well, the University of Dakar, at the time I was there, was a French university with French teachers. You remember Dakar became independent that very year. The university was established by the French as a college of the University of Paris and Bordeaux. It was very much part of the academic system of France. They did not depend at all on Senegal. It is only in the mid 1960s, indeed, it started in 1963, and we fought against it. Senegal wanted to make it Senegal University. At the time I was there, Senegal did not have the economic means to have a university of itself. It was a French university.

Yet being at Dakar opened my eyes to things from Africa. I must say already that even the high school I was in, their was a system by the French unexpectedly in the same territory where there had been also not only Dahomean, but people who came from any part of West Africa. I had also people from Niger, people from the Ivory Coast, because they had the East-West African-French Federation at the time. Dakar was the capital of all the West African colonies; therefore, that is why the university was located there. Being there where so many West Africans converge, not only West African, even people from as far as Uganda and Tanzania which made the environment more West African than we knew. We were

forced, therefore _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**) the idea of being an African. And we also had an association of African students. We were not subdivided into only colonies, like a Dahomean student as opposed to an Ugandian student. We did have that as subunits of the whole West African Student Union. I was very much involved in student politics. I was even the vice-president of the faculty arts branch of our unit.

And it is as a result of demonstrations that I was sent out of the country. I had to go to France. That demonstration was against the president of my country wanting to force us to become a branch of the party he created. Those were the years when some presidents in Africa thought that in order to have national unity, they had to force everyone to be in one and the same party. We as students opposed that and thought that individuals should be free to adhere or not to the parties created by the establishment or those governments. And we needed to be free to create opposition parties. We debate and it is multi-partisan. We were doing that and asking that people should be free to create their parties and not be forced into official parties. And the government did not accept that.

We had a demonstration while the president of my country was officially visiting the synagogue in Dakar. I was apprehended [and] jailed for one and one-half months. I was

jailed in my life not because I was a criminal, but because I was defending freedom. [I was] jailed for one and one-half months. I came out of jail [and] was sentenced to one and one-half months in prison. I was already in prison. My country also asked for the synagogue to extradite me. They wanted to punish me in my country, not in Senegal. They wanted to re-punish me. It seems we had our people in the police, where we knew someone so extradition probably the request for extradition and later written in reply, granting it to my government.

That is why, in anticipation that I was [going to be extradited], I went underground with four of my colleagues. We ended up in France. So I went to France as a kind of freedom-fighter, if I may say so. [Laughter] France was forced to give us scholarships because [we] were a good students. They did not want to appear in the eyes of our government as people who encouraged students who were anti-government, but at the same time they did not want to appear as people who were against freedom and who were kind of repressing good students. And we were good students. I worked for some time. I did not have a scholarship. The French reestablished me by giving me a scholarship again. That is why I became a French scholar in France.

S:When was this and where did you study?

Y:I studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. That was in 1963. I was to have graduated in 1963 but I lost that year because of those incidents. I could not take my exam in Dakar. When I arrived in Paris, it was too late to register for any of the courses I was taking in Dakar. I was there studying by myself, going to the libraries, and I lost a whole year. But it was a rewarding year in terms of struggle and the self. I read freely, but I could not take any exams. That is why I graduated in 1964. When I registered officially in October of 1963, and received my bachelor of arts degree in 1964.

S:Where did you get your higher degrees? In what did you get your master of arts degree?

Y:It was in Ibadan. After the first degree I was interested in African languages, particularly Yoruba. In those years, very few African languages were taught at that level in any European university, and definitely I believe also, American universities. Because Yoruba was not French, [they] did not colonize the biggest part of Yorubaland. They did not develop any study of Yoruba in their universities. So I could not do them. I wanted to do Yoruba. My professors were not interested in that. They wanted me to go back to Africa and study African French, the kind of creole African French which we wanted to contrast with real French so as to improve the French of Africans. You want to know the kind

of mistakes young African people make in schools so as to correct them. But I was not interested in that, I wanted to be interested in African languages for my own sake. That is why I had to go to the University of Ibadan which was, at the time, one of the highest, if not the highest [and] best department for the study of African languages.

S:What languages were taught in the department?

Y:At the time, they gave lectures on African linguistics in general [and] on the history of African languages. There were bachelor of arts degrees in Yoruba, Ibo, and Hausa. Yoruba was more developed, although there were also courses in the Hausa and Ibo languages. Ibo could not develop as fast because those were the years of civil war in Nigeria and many had left. Many who were lecturers and professors had left. But Yoruba was highly legal at the time. So I had to take courses. I was already in France in correspondence with my Nigerian professors on the business of speaking the same languages. They were very schooled in English, of course. So when I went there I was given a scholarship by the West African Linguist Society to study linguistics.

S:So when did you seek your doctorate?

Y:I never received a doctorate. Never. I started my doctorate at the Sorbonne in France, which I never finished precisely because of what I told you. I was interested Yoruba in Cuba

and Brazil. So after my qualifying exam, I asked the French, who gave me the scholarship to study, to send me for research [and] fieldwork to Brazil and Cuba since I did Spanish and Latin American studies. But the French government refused to send me because that was 1964, 1965, and they thought that sending an African to Cuba [would turn him into] a revolutionary. Remember, those were the years of Castro and Che Guevarra. And given my background as someone who was expelled from the synagogue for political activities, which I continued in France--I was vice-president of cultural affairs for the Federation of African Students in France--they thought it was risky to send me to Cuba because I may not come back. They also thought that if I did come back I would be even more anti-French. I would bring the seeds of the Cuban Revolution back.

They said, "You can write a doctorate on the basis of documents you have in Paris." Of course, I did not want the doctorate just as a title. I refused. They gave me a teaching assistantship to go to the University of Ibadan to do precisely what I told you--study errors made by African people when they speak in French so as to correct those errors. Since I was not interested in that, I went to the University of Ibadan instead. After my qualifying exam, I did another master of arts degree in _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**), Yoruba, and linguistics. And by the time I did

that, my professor thought I had some publication, and I did not need to write a doctorate degree. You could do that in the British system. Here, with publication, I am a full professor without a doctorate.

S:What brought you here?

Y:Well, I came here because I learned they had a position in Yoruba here, and I saw Florida as a kind of window opened to the Yoruba world in the Caribbean and Brazil. Florida was kind of midway between Africa and Brazil. And I thought an American university could play the role of an intermediary midway between Africa and African diaspora in the Caribbean and Brazil. The position description also asked for someone who was interested in Yoruba in the western hemisphere which always has been my interest since my student days.

I must say that when I was a professor at Ife I spent a year in Brazil of course, doing research and teaching. So I applied. I was at the University of Birmingham in England when I got notice that I was to come here for an interview. And I came. That was in 1987, yes, 1987. I came here for the interview. Frankly, they thought I was able to have this job and they gave it to me. So after two years at Ibadan and thirteen at Ife, one in Brazil, one in Birmingham, that I landed here as my last . . .

S:Hopefully. [Laughter]

Y:Yes. So I see this University as having the potential to unite the Caribbean, Brazil, and Africa in terms of African traditions and languages in the New World. You must realize that there are very few instances that you find American universities or Brazilian or Caribbean universities having direct links with African universities. Given the importance of Yoruba in the New World now, clearly through Cuba and Miami and New York, I thought the University of Florida would be a good link between Africa and the New World.

S:Has it been thus far?

Y:Well, thus far we have tried [to set up a link to Africa]. We tried. We had a conference on Yoruba in the New World in 1989. It was well attended. Last year we had also a conference in _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**), as you know. Definitely since I came here the Africanness of so-called Latin America has come a bit more to the forefront because it was almost completely ignored, not recognized. At least I have tried with others to achieve it. It is coming. It will take some time.

S:When you came here, were you given the job as chairperson?

Y:No, no. I came here as a full professor in the department, and three years later the position of chair was open. I did not want it. Actually, my strategy was to encourage other Africans to apply for it so that [there would be] many

Africans here. And they did apply. But somehow, they were defeated on the basis that they did not have administrative experience in the United States. When other Africans who did have experience in the United States applied and also were interviewed, they were not found [to be] eligible. My colleagues in the department suggested that I be interim chairman. I reluctantly accepted with the expectation that in a while they would find someone. That was in 1991. In 1992, and beginning of 1993, the dean thought that I, on the basis of what my colleagues think of me and _____ **(PLEASE IDENTIFY)** that they did not need to go outside for another because I was administering the department very well. That is how I became chairman.

S:Okay, I am going to play devil's advocate now.

Y:Yes, please.

S:Do you think maybe because you are an African and you were already here that they felt it would be easier to bring you into that position, versus actually bringing more Africans into the department? They could have you serving two functions as an African scholar as well as department chair instead of having two Africans here--one as a scholar and one as a department chair.

Y:To be fair to administrators, I must say that what happened was not their intention. If there was any intention and if there is anyone to blame, then it is my colleagues in the

department, not the dean's office, not the chairman. We interviewed people including at least one African. I, personally, would have preferred to have another colleague, another brother here because I must tell you, among those who applied, I could have applied also to the position that was open. It was open, but I did not. Most of those who applied, I knew, because they were my colleagues back home. And indeed they were very able academically.

As scholars there was nobody who could beat them. That is why you have nobody from Asia because this department, you have to remember, is the department of African and Asian [studies]. In Niger, particularly, at the top because they are very good scholars, no doubt. So this criterion of not having administrative experience in America, I believe, to be sincere, was brought up as an ultimate thing to kind of discard them. I believe that if you have never had an administrative experience in America . . . no one is born with it. You have to be there to start having it. Do you understand what I mean?

S:Yes.

Y:So it was intended, I believe, to discard Africans. They were discarded. I am here. I could not be discarded. So I was, against my will, pushed into [this position]. If things were done normally, without any prejudice, I am sure that I could have had an African chairman from Africa here. And I

do not believe they would have done badly because some of them, at least two of them, were already deans. Oh yes, the colleagues I knew were deans. I have never been interested in that position. Those [deans] are not only good scholars, but also they had administrative experience there. The reasoning here is that unless you have academic experience in America, you would not qualify. I believe that is wrong. But that is my belief, not the establishment's.

S: So have you seen many changes since you have been here and since you have been department chair? Has it become more acceptable for Africans?

Y: I would think so. I think that being here has given Africans more confidence to approach this department and to approach me. I am more comfortable, definitely. In terms of changes, well, I did not change anything radical, but I definitely created an internal dialogue in _____ **(PLEASE IDENTIFY)** departments. I believe I am very accessible to my colleagues. I create an orientation of responsibility and research. I want my colleagues not only to teach and be good teachers, but also to demonstrate that they are here to do research. For instance, I started a seminar series and it has been successful so far.

I am sure when and if we have a graduate degree here--we are not yet a degree-granting department--we will have people writing and calling and wanting to be graduate students in

the department from within the United States, from all universities from west to east as well as from home, from African universities who want to come here to do graduate work in African languages and African literature. What I do now is to encourage them to be positioned in a different department like in English, anthropology, or whatever and then have a joint supervision with someone who has expertise in this department. But definitely, there is more interest in the department since I came here, and I must confess, from both Africans and non-Africans alike.

S:Has it been harder to get funding for this department than some of the others?

Y:Yes, well, it is tough to say because, as you know, these are very hard times financially for the whole state university system. But the dean understands this. When I argue with the dean I try to convince him of the necessities to do something. He tries his best. I cannot say [that he does not]. In terms of funding, we do not have much, but I believe that the dean takes me very seriously and has been very accessible so far.

S:[Laughter]

Y:[Laughter]

S:What changes do you see [yourself] making in the future? What direction would you like to see the department go in within the next few years?

Y:For me, coming here is kind of a demotion, I will tell you, because the kind of work we were doing at Ife was promoting the highest level of academic discourse and production. And the kinds of things we wrote, the publications we made at the University of Ife now are all over the world. I am saying that not as a vain discourse or boast. I am not boasting. It is real. I am not the only one to say it. I received a letter from someone who is now at UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), a white professor of philosophy, a white American, who was complaining that unfortunately most of us have left Ife for an American university. You can never find concentrated in the same area and the same place that number of scholars interested in promoting African culture who are involved and are good researchers. They are not just people who do research just for dollars, but who also have their roots in African cultures and who are well trained as scholars in the African cultures we have in Euro-American scholarship. So coming here, therefore for me, was kind of a passion for research and culture here. And I would like that to exist here. My objective since I became chairman was to elevate this department to a level of a research department. I hope we will have better days when we will be getting more money and then we can attract more students. You do not have a good graduate department when you do not have good graduate

students, when you do not have more of them. And also, very critical to this department is linkages with universities in Asia and Africa. So I am starting that relationship now, creating linkages with Africa. When the ambassador of Mozambique came here, we talked about it. I want to have linkages with the University of Mozambique and _____ **(PLEASE IDENTIFY)** University in Maputo. Already, I negotiated a linkage with the University of Bahia in Brazil, where I taught for seven years. I see myself as a _____ **(PLEASE IDENTIFY)**, bringing together people who think, wherever they are, the intent of African studies, of African cultures in Africa and elsewhere. I am also doing the same for Asia, because I am also _____ **(PLEASE IDENTIFY)**. I am starting a relationship between this institution and other universities elsewhere. That is my objective for the short and midterm. If I can do something toward it, I will, until someone else comes in. I hope to push it forward.

S:I wanted to know a little bit about your wife and family, her name.

Y:Her name is Antoinette. I think you have met her.

S:Yes. [Laughter]

Y:She is trained as a professor of French, although she is not teaching right now. She is more interested in fashion design right now, and that is what she is doing. It is not

bringing in much money. And she _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**) of Yoruba. Her great-great-great grandparents were people from my area who were taken as slaves to Brazil. They returned and came back. But when they came back, they stayed in Yoruba, and then her grandfather was a translator _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**). He spoke Brazilian Portuguese as well as French as well as English, of course. Then he moved to what is now Dahomey at the time because he married someone from that area. _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**) split, that is why she became _____ (**PLEASE IDENTIFY**) although she has many cousins still in Lagos and Abeokuta. So I have family back there now. I know her cousin in Brazil because he has the same name, same family. She has not been there yet, but I do know him.

S:How many children do you have?

Y:Oh yes, we have four children--three girls and one boy. They are from twenty-three to fourteen.

S:Thank you so much.