

Oral History Interview: John Adewoye

Interviewee: John Adewoye

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B. This is Mark Bowman. It's December 14, 2014 here in my home in Chicago with John Ademola Adewoye. So John, why don't you say your name and spell it for the transcriber?

John A. I am John Ademola Adewoye. Ademola is spelled A-D-E-W-O-Y-E and Adewoye is A-D-E-W-O-Y-E. I guess I spelled Ademola wrongly. It's A-D-E-M-O-L-A.

Mark B. Thank you, John. It's good to have this time with you. And so as I've already mentioned, we're doing an oral history, so I would ask you to just sort of begin at the beginning—where were you born, when were you born, what was the situation you were born in?

John A. I am from Nigeria, and my hometown is called Oro, O-R-O. It's in Yoruba Land in one of the states that happen to be in between the west and the northern part of Nigeria. The state is majority Yoruba, and the people in my hometown hail from Oyo Alaafin to settle where we are today. There are nine villages combined to make that town called Oro, and one of those nine villages somehow happened to be founded by my own great-great-grandfather. When the whole village was not up to nine,

had issue with his own village then and moved away to start a new community. And therefore my father's hometown, for real, is Iludun-Oro, I-L-U-D-U-N hyphen Oro, O-R-O.

I was born July 30, 1959. I'm aging fast. And I'm the last child of my parents, Michael Adewoye and Agnes Adewoye. I have two sisters and one brother, and I have a number of nieces and nephews. I actually have three nephews. I have two existing nieces now—no, three existing nieces because my... Actually, I take that back. My brother has got three girls. I've been away from home for quite a while.

My brother has got three girls and my other sister has got two. I should have more than that, but my elder sister had three girls and they all died of sickle cell. It's, you know, it's been...that particular disease is very common in the Black community, and if a person marries wrongly to a complete wrong...with a wrong person, he or she, they end up having sickle cell kids. So my elder sister lost three kids to sickle cell, so she's left with only one son now. So she's got one son, my brother has got one son, and my sister one son, so I have three nephews.

Mark B. Tell me about your parents. What did they do?

John A. My father worked with the Notre Dame Sisters, and he was what we call florist back in Nigeria, which here, a florist is someone who sells flower. But back at home, in those days, a florist also deals with flowers, but he tends the garden, trims the flower, just make sure they grow well. So that

was what my father did. And he did a little bit of agricultural farming, too, to supplement the family.

My mother Agnes Oladiyun was a trader. There is this tradition, back in my place, some people trade in clothings and they pass that on from one generation to another. She is from a family that trades in red palm oil.

Mark B. Red palm oil, okay.

John A. Yeah. And so it's...

Mark B. What is it used for?

John A. It's for cooking, they use it to make medication, they use it for preservation. It serves the purpose of grain nut oil or vegetable oil we use mostly nowadays. And she also did a little bit of vegetable oil during her time. She was more entrepreneurial oriented than my dad. She also traded, at a point in her life, in ceramic plates, and she did a big job with that. That was when they were living in the city, in Lagos. They did a lot of that.

Mark B. So you moved to Lagos at a certain point?

John A. Yeah.

Mark B. How old were you when you moved?

John A. 1966. I will say I was about seven years old.

Mark B. Do you remember much of the village life? What do you remember from the village, what you did?

John A. Well, I grew up in the village. It was a small community. The town where my dad was born, he moved away from there to the town where his great-great-grandfather lived.

Mark B. Okay.

John A. And that was where we were all born. That is where we claim now, even though the other place still recognizes us. And the village life was very neatly put together. Families united. We know each other intimately. And that was where I started my elementary school. Even when I moved to the city, I still went back to the village, and my parents were in the city, and then I continued my schooling in the village. They eventually came back to the village, and then we lived together before I finished my elementary school.

The life in the village in my hometown also centers on religion. Of course, my hometown is about 95% Catholic. Catholicism came to that town, to the particular village where my dad is now, called the main Oro, around 1916, 1918, and it's been there. My mom was young when Catholicism came. My dad was born 1904, so he was able to remember a lot of things about the advent of Catholicism in my hometown.

And so then we have Catholics and the other set of religion was Muslim, about 5%. And there are certain visitors who came to the town. They have their own churches, which they go and...but you don't see the town people going to their church because the church was not just a place of prayer, it was also a place of social gathering.

We had two elementary schools. I attended the two. I started at Mt. Carmel Elementary School and I finished up at St. Andrews. Then we have two colleges. When I talk of college I'm not—back in Nigeria college is high school, the equivalent of high school. We have Notre Dame for girls and then we have Oro Grammar School for boys. I did not attend any of those, actually. I did not do my high school...I did my high school outside my village.

Village, as I said, it's a warm place where people meet. There are market days, and during the market days a lot of things happen. People from different places will come. It's like a big feast. It's always an open market. It's not a mall with...but it's open and people spread out their wares. And I've been with my mom a number of times where she sells palm oil, and in front of her auntie's house, which was just very close to the market, and I can still envision her sitting under the tree with about three others, women trading in that. I still remember that.

Mark B. What were your interests? What did you spend your time doing? What did you enjoy doing in those childhood years?

John A. My childhood, I love hunting crabs and mushrooms.

Mark B. Tell me about that.

John A. You know what a crab is. They are easy to hunt during the dry season because water in the rivers around, most have subsided, and then I'll go with some of my friends. Then, during the rainy season, mushrooms are common. And there is a particular kind of mushroom we call ogogo. It's very nutritious.

I told one of my high school seniors who is now a chief in my hometown, actually I told him about two months or three months ago, when they—you know Facebook is such a uniting center—and then there was talk about ogogo season, so I said wow, I've not seen that in about 18 years, will he take a picture and put it online? Well, he didn't, but I wish he did. And maybe if I am alive next year I will push someone to at least take a picture and show.

Mark B. We'll have to get a picture and put it with your interview.

John A. I would love to do that.

Mark B. The crabs and mushrooms you brought home to eat or you sold them or traded them?

John A. The mushroom I will sell. I will sell the mushrooms. But the crab, it's for eating. It's for eating. And it also gave us, myself and my friend... The

village life, people go stream to bath, and we do men watching during crab catching, too. I hope you're not... You know, you see all kinds of men, you know, how huge a business and so on going to the stream, even when I was... Between age nine to 14, I did a lot of that. I said wow, just look at that.

Mark B. So you were aware that you were attracted to men at that time?

John A. I was, but to be frank, I didn't give any name to it because being gay wasn't something that...it wasn't openly spoken of. It wasn't openly spoken of as it is now. And when I see the young ones now, even from Africa, who are able to identify themselves a much earlier age than I was able to, I feel proud of them, and I feel scared for them because the kind of privacy I had, they don't have it.

Even though despite my privacy, my elementary school, on that aspect was very, very traumatic. It was very, very traumatic because I was very, very...I was kind of overly effeminate growing up, and people, right from my first day in elementary school, people picked on that.

Mark B. Other students, teachers, both?

John A. My peers.

Mark B. Your peers, okay.

John A. As little as we were, but it...because that was...it was that very year they gave me a nickname, “girl,” “obirin,” O-B-I-R-N-I-N, and obirin means a girl. I went to the bathroom and I sat on the toilet seat to pee, and it was like, “Why did you do that?” And I said, “Well, that’s what I like to do. It’s convenient for me and I like it, it’s relaxing for me.” “No, it’s girls who do that.” And I like working at the... “I saw him in the classroom crossing his leg. This one is a girl.” “He won’t play soccer, football. He can’t play football. He can’t farm.”

I’ll catch a crab. It’s adventure. But when it comes to going to the farm to do all those things, it’s just like, no. And then, luckily for me, my dad had no real farm until I left home. So he worked with the Notre Dame Sisters trimming his flowers and making pots, making sure their lawns are well kept and all those things. That was what he did. And he never invited us to that, and he never prayed that we would do that.

Mark B. Clarify language. Did you grow up speaking English, Yoruba? What was the language in the home? What language did you do in school?

John A. Well, I grew up speaking Yoruba, and my whole village, you know, I’m from Yoruba by tribe. The tribe is Yoruba, the language is Yoruba, the culture is Yoruba, the food is Yoruba. So I grew up speaking Yoruba. But there were areas—Nigeria was colonized by the British. Therefore, or as a comedian in Nigeria will say, “there five,” it was compulsory that we learn English. And then knowing fully well that we...the world was

exploding to...you know, connection was becoming more and more...the world was getting connected, in short, and people.

So traveling, white people, you know, came to Nigeria as missionaries. Like my dad worked with the Notre Dame Sisters. He couldn't speak English, but those people picked Yoruba and they find their own way of communication, and he was able to do his work with them, and they always appreciate him. But we started learning English from day one in elementary school.

So we learned two types of alphabets—ABC and Ah-Be-Dee. ABC is for English, Ah-Be-Dee is for Yoruba, so that was how it was. And then eventually we wanted to just...in most homes, like my sister, my elder sister's kids, at a point they couldn't speak a word of our own language, but English. And it was like no, this is...it was very tumult, you know. They eat the local food, they dress local way, but communication was kind of English. Now, we're not in London, we're not in England. They have to speak this. So eventually they picked the language and so on.

But during my own time, we had to learn English, and then we do perfection of the language in high school, when French will also be introduced. But nowadays, from elementary school, like the school my little nieces, two nieces and nephew are going, my brother's kids, they do English, French and then their local language, Yoruba.

Mark B. So your parents moved to Lagos. Why did they do that?

John A. They moved to Lagos when my elder sister, after she concluded her high school, went to teachers training college. But before that, actually, before I was born, they were in Lagos. Then they moved back. So when she started her school as a single lady, she just needed some support, and they thought that, oh... Our people do a lot to encourage education. So no, let's just move with her and support her to finish it. So they moved with her.

My dad stayed, then he went back to the village, so my mom alone stayed with her, and I was with my mom. And then eventually ...no, they don't like the city schools because it was crowded, they believe bad influence. They just had all this kind of thought. So I had to move back to the village with my dad while my mom stayed in Lagos. It's a...is kind of...it was...it really shook their family, but she got the attention she needed to finish her program. And then eventually everybody became reunited, and as people grew up, we left home.

Mark B. Any other parts of your childhood that are important in terms of making who you are that you think of?

John A. Yeah. There is...well, as a little boy, I will follow my dad to work, and I loved the Notre Dame Sisters. And I so much admired them that I felt one day I'll become a nun. And I will dress at home as a nun. And I will tell my dad I'll be a nun, and it was like, mmm, boys don't be nun.

As Catholics, they expected me to join the altar boys, but that didn't really interest me. It was more I saw it as a boy's act. The only aspect of altar boys that interested me was the long robe, which looks very much like a nun's habit. I love that. Which eventually made me join them.

Mark B. Join whom?

John A. The altar boys. So altar boys in Catholic Church serve during the mass, carry candle, give the priests wine and water, hold communion plates.

Apart from that, really they are like the flower pots to beautify the sanctuary, kind of. So I did that as a kid. I was not in sports because I wasn't a... Sport was just too rough for my liking. Anything that could bruise me I will want to abstain from. Instead I'll go swimming.

Swimming does not cause any bruise. I'll go swimming in the river. I could bathe twice a day and just sit, you know, making up and others.

And then so I told my dad I would love to become a nun, and it was like no, boys don't be nun. Well, I eventually forgot the idea. And the aspect of cross-dressing actually dated a little longer before the nun story, because I still remember as a little boy I loved to play with dolls. It was wooden dolls. They were made—carved wooden doll. And I wanted to have my doll and carry my doll in the back as women would do, and my mom would just let me have the wrapper, the small one, and then we do that. I still recall that.

There was one day we went out. I'm still trying to recall it. I know she really gave me some serious spanking because I said...after she gave me good dressing, you know, had knit shirt and shorts to wear, sandal on my legs, I wanted wrapper to tie, and it was like no, boys don't do that. And then I followed her. I was crying for that, like really throwing tantrum.

And I still recollect people asking her—I thought they saw me crying, and in the village if they stop her and ask her what was going on, she would eventually say okay, have it. I still remember them say, “Princess, what’s going on with your son?” And the reply was, “Don’t mind him.” And she kept looking just straight and just going on. It was like you’re not going to have it today. I can’t remember if I’ve had it going out before, when the memory came to my brain, but I think I must have. But it was like, no, you’re not going to have it today.

So we went to my uncle’s house, my dad’s junior brother, and she took me into the bathroom, got a bucket of water, and gave me serious spanking in the bathroom. And people were knocking the door saying, you know, “Agnes, what is going on there? Open the door,” and so on. And I remember coming out eventually, when she opened the door. I ran out and my uncle caught me and took me to himself, and I probably slept, and I had no memory of it again until years, years, years later, when the aspect of me wanting to cross-dress came up, and I was like, oh, as a kid, you know. That was when I got to high school.

As a kid I know I dressed—I know I dressed at home. When I was nine, ten, I cross-dressed, used my mama’s dress when she wasn’t home. And before she goes out, sometimes I will help her with her head gear. I don’t know if you’ve seen Nigerian women here. I was good at that, and I will help my mom with that, and people will see it and wonder, oh wow, she’s very...you know, thought she was good at it, and I was the one who did it.

At primary school, this was filled with adventure. But another aspect of it was people picking on my effeminate behavior and targeting it as a weakness, as if it’s a kind of weakness. And at least in a week, working day of the week, at least I’ll fight twice, particularly in the school. There was this year, I remember this one really, it was 1969. Catholicism, we celebrated the 50th year of Catholicism in 1968, December. So 1969 we were back to school. I was...I had then nine years plus, or I was already ten. The month I couldn’t remember.

And in the school I had discovered three other boys who were just like me, and then we’ll move together, we’ll eat together, we’ll talk together.

During lunch break, you go and if you didn’t bring food from home, you go and buy from...and it’s an open thing. It’s not a dining kind of set as we have in the U.S. So the three of us will always be together because we get picked on constantly, and we had collaborated to fight people.

So this day, whatever happened, I didn’t see the two of them, so I was conscious of what may happen. Shall I go out and eat? I brought food

from home. Then I could get attacked by guys or other boys there. So I decided to stay in the classroom, and everybody was gone. I was the only one in the classroom. I had finished my food, put away my plate. Then two boys—no, three boys came into the classroom, and it was like...they were like, “Why are you here all by yourself?” I said, “Well, it’s none of your business.”

Then one of them used my nickname, improvised a song with my nickname “obirnin,” and just kept repeating, “Obirnin, obirnin, obirnin.” Before I knew it the other two started beating their lockers, the desk with their pencils and rulers, making music to that, and it started growing louder and louder. So I blocked my ears. It wasn’t doing it for me. And the only thing for me was to leave the classroom from them.

And I sat close to the front. I liked to stay in the front. My desk was close to the front. And this was being done in the front. And to one side was an exit door. We had two exit doors in each classroom. So I got up and when they saw that I wanted to go out, they blocked the exit door, the first one, the closest to me. So, well, I had opportunity for another one at the back, so I made for the back. And one of them pushed a desk, and the desk got my back. You can see.

Mark B. You still have a scar? Mm-hmm.

John A. And then I fell down. It was so painful. I adore my feet. I just...I spent time, when I washed my whole body, I spent extra time washing those

feet. I spent extra time, you know, putting oil or whatever. Then someone threw the desk on it. It was a painful experience. The scar, the tear was like this, as you saw now.

Mark B. A couple inches, yeah.

John A. A couple inches. And then I was taken to the school infirmary for treatment. They did a cleaning which was painful. Then they applied iodine, which was more painful, apart from the fact that I hate the smell. Apart from the fact that I hate to have a plaster or scratch or anything. So I screamed. And I still recollect the teacher saying, you know, "Shut up! Why you won't stop behaving like a girl?"

Mark B. The teacher said this to you?

John A. The teacher said it. So I gave him a scornful look. But who gives scornful look? Again, it is girls. And he said, "That is what I'm saying. Just look at the way you look at me now. If you repeat that look I'm going to slap you." And I didn't repeat it because teachers had power in my country, and if he punishes me, if he beats me up, my parents will side with him. I didn't repeat it.

And to be frank, the scornful look I gave him was just spontaneous. It wasn't as if, okay, I practiced it. I don't know how other boys will have done it. Well, that memory, you know, the aspect of fighting and so on, was very, very, very, very stressful for me. It was very, very stressful.

And when I finished my last year in elementary school—we do seven years of elementary school, but it was for my sake that they cut a year, so I did six years of elementary school and six years of high school, but originally it was seven years of elementary school. [*Unrelated interruption.*]

Mark B. So John, you were just talking about finishing up elementary school.

John A. So with that I went to school every day in fear, and all the same, I went to school every day.

Mark B. But you still went every day.

John A. I still went every day. And the courage to go every day wasn't even my two friends. But one of my distant family member, Maria, they call her, who hate going to school, she hated it, and every day she will cry to go to school, and if I will not go, she will not go. So I just made up my mind I will go no matter what. And then will go to, you know, I went to school.

At the same time I was very...my final year in elementary school the thought of—that was 1971—the thought of going to high school was like, oh! I knew the...I heard stories of seniors beating up juniors and all those things, but that wasn't a big problem for me. But the thought of people calling me names and challenging me to physical combat, like I went through in my elementary school, was like no, I don't want that again. So I deliberately failed common entrance.

Mark B. You failed common entrance.

John A. Yeah, common entrance was an exam we take in elementary school to qualify for high school.

Mark B. This was in the public school system, right?

John A. In the public school system. I failed it. By the time my family knew, it was late to enroll me for even private school exams. And I remember my dad calling me. And that time I was, 1971 I was between 11 and 12, and I had a boyfriend. Well, we just, we would do it, exchange letters. He was kind of like a guy next door, and we were about the same age. We kiss, we just, you know, we were very intimate, even sexually, though the sexuality of our intimacy wasn't...had no penetration or anything, but we were kind of sexually intimate.

So he was outside the house, and when I—we had...our window was like this, wooden but with glass, and we could see people outside. He was outside. I saw him. And I was like, oh, he was there. I was going to jump out. And my dad called me. It's like, "John, now that you failed common entrance and you're now talking, you open up that you don't want to go to high school, what do you want to do for a living in life?" So I stood before him and I pushed my chest forward, and I dangle my hands, and I did...

Mark B. Like you were typing.

John A. Yeah. I love that. And in my village then we had only one typist, Mrs. Olorunisomo. They call her Omonide. Ide is silver.

Mark B. The word again is what?

John A. Ide, I-D-E. In English you will spell it I-D-E, E as in elephant. But it means silver. And am] is child, like my baby is silver. Omoniwura, ura is gold. My baby is gold. So they called her Omonide, and she was the only typist we had in the whole village. And like my dad, she works...she used to work with the Notre Dame Sisters. So my dad was furious when he heard that. And after I said it, in my own innocence I had poured it out, I need to meet this guy. So I was going to jump out.

My dad was very gentle. I have no recollection of my dad spanking me any time. And he will talk, and sometimes he could use harsh tone to get our attention. So he kind of roared like a lion, kind of, to stop me from jumping out, kind of like, "What type of boy are you? Why is it that all the girls do is what you two like to do? You want to do Aman Ide's job. Is that going to feed you and your wife? That is women's job. No wonder they call you girl." I was like oh! When he said that, all the other things he said before, but when he said no wonder they call you girl, it was like, oh! So he knows they call me girl.

Mark B. He knows.

John A. I was, you know, I was frozen, I was kind of, I felt somehow, I felt sad. I felt sad, and it was like oh. Kind of my head was down. But my mind was outside with that guy. And I still recollect my mother, who was in the inner room, calling out, “Michael, what is that?” And he responded, “Your son want to do Omonide’s job. He is the only boy”—he had only two sons, and then he said, “He’s the only boy in this house I couldn’t get out of the kitchen. He is the one who helps you even, you know, make your head gear when you want to go out. Why is it that all the girls want to do is what attracts him?”

And I still remember my mom saying, “And is that why you had to shout like that at him? If that is what he wants to do, let him do it.” And then everything went silent. So instead of jumping out as I wanted to do before, I quietly walked out. I have no recollection of what happened after that, but I went out and I met Bode, B-O-D-E, is the name of that young guy, my friend. I met him and we just played away.

Eventually I went to typing school. I don’t know how they came to that conclusion, but by the time I finished, my sister told me—the teacher, she was married then—and then she told me to come and stay with her in Lagos, that she was going to enroll me in the typing thing.

Mark B. Typing school, okay.

John A. I didn’t even ask how she came to that conclusion, and if it was disclosed, but that was one thing I wanted to do. So I went there, stayed with her.

But as a teacher, every day she comes back from school, we talk about going back to high school. And she spoke so, you know, too much about it that I eventually felt like yes, I must go. The good things about high school, the friends, the new persons that you meet, and then eventually how you become a big man, a prosperous man, a learned man. So I agreed to.

So after staying with her for almost a year, I went back to our hometown. But I couldn't do common entrance, so I had to take entrance examination to private schools. And that was a phase that saw me to high school. So what school I go? I still had this fear, because going back to the village really brought back the fear. In the city, I had...within that one year I had no...I had only one memory of my adventure with men admiration, and it was...

My sister and the husband lived in a three story apartment, and on the third floor there was a man from our hometown, though another village there, Mr. Awolowo, himself and his brother lived together. Oh my god, this man was gorgeous. And before he calls me once, I will have pretend I heard him calling me twice. I was a little boy. And I will go there. Maybe he noticed or not, I don't know. But I could sit the whole day watching his feet if he wasn't having his socks or anything on, or just watching his face, or if he was sparsely dressed, watching his chest.

I just loved being where that man was. But there was nothing apart from that. It was just like if I grew up, I want to be like that. He was tall, always well groomed. And I don't know what he did. Either he worked in a bank or whatever he was doing, I don't remember, but he was just a beautiful, beautiful man.

I met one of his sons—no, his nephew on Facebook about three years ago, and when I saw the name, I hit him up and it was the first question I ask. I say where is Uncle Raphael? He said, oh, he's still in Lagos. I said oh wow, that man was beautiful. And the young man said yes, he is handsome, and he still is the most handsome in the family, even up till now. I say yes, he's beautiful, and he say yes, he's handsome. I say okay. Of course that time they've all know that, you know, I was out already and everybody knew that John is gay. And I told him, I said, believe me, he may not know it, but as a young boy, he was my crush. I just, I...anyway.

Mark B. So high school. You went to...?

John A. I went to high school. I went back to the village, did exams to four different schools. I was admitted to three, I was admitted to two, and I moved from one to another. I have not studied. It was only a provisional examination...admission, so this is the time you're going to start. Then the result of the other school came. And my thought was the first one was further away from home. I need a school closer to home. I needed that in

case something happens I can just go home. So I moved to the one closer to home.

Then my grand-aunt, who was my godmother at baptism, came out of home after my.... It was like...they call me Joonu, which is John.

“Joonu, you wanted to be a nun as a kid. The entrance examination to seminary college is out.” And I was like, oh, I could be a priest. At that time I was also obsessed with the cassock. So I said I could be a priest.

But apart from that, I felt going to a mission school, church high school, and being somewhere where people are groomed for the priesthood, it will just be a holy place and there will be no name-calling, there will be no fighting. I was just, in my own naïve world, dreaming, having my own fantasy of a safe world, and which has been my goal, even moving from one place to another.

Mark B. To be safe.

John A. To be safe. That was my goal. But much more than that, that was the first time I really gave a thought to being a Catholic priest. So I did the entrance examination and I went to that school. That was one place where I really became gay. It was just filled with beautiful, young guys, seniors who were taller than me, and oh, it was fun. It was fun sexually, academically, and socially. I enjoyed my high school. I hate my elementary school.

Mark B. What was the high school?

John A. Our Lady and St. Kizito. And it's miles away from home, about two or three hours' drive from my hometown.

Mark B. So you lived there, too.

John A. Yeah. It was...we had to live in the school. I loved it. I loved St. Kizito. And then they...they didn't call me girl in St. Kizito, but they gave me a girl's name, so I kind of graduated from just girl to having a girl's name. And how did that happen? Well, all boys school, we had a comedy group. We can't just be acting shepherd show all the time. There were times we needed to act family, but...and who will be a girl?

Mark B. You raised your hand.

John A. Oh, my god, I went for it. And I made just good use of that opportunity. So the first show I did with them at all, the lady in that show was named Memunat.

Mark B. Named what?

John A. Memunat. Memunat is an Islamic name often given to girls. And that became my name.

Mark B. That became your name.

John A. All through my high school.

Mark B. Can you spell that out?

John A. M-E-M-U-N-A-T, Memunat. And that became my name. Of course if I cross-dress on the stage, people sometimes would say, oh wow, maybe they went to the other schools to bring in girls to come and act. I could change my voice. It was interesting.

Mark B. You were good.

John A. I was good. I was. And actually, from there, the thought of going to...becoming an actor also came to my mind, from there, even though I was seriously thinking of becoming a priest. And it was also there that Matthew, wherever it is in Matthew came so much to my mind, some are made eunuch, some made themselves eunuch, because it was in my high school I just knew that, you know, I will love to...be, make girl. But I really don't think I want to have anything to do with girls, because I've got enough girls in me. It's guys I want.

And then not being attracted to girls it's like okay, if I'm not attracted to girls, perhaps I'll be good material for the Catholic priesthood. That was where the concept got strengthened, even though my auntie, God rest her soul, had the thought of okay, if you can't become a nun, you can become priest, which was always the pride of the family, like oh my god, they had priests in their family, oh, they have a nun, they have a reverend brother. It's almost like oh, they have a doctor, which is also, you know. Every

family is struggling to have a doctor, to have a lawyer, and a priest or other people—

Mark B. Religious.

John A. Religious. And the family will put money together to sponsor any one of their kids just to attain such a status. He's religious. Oh! That's my brother's, sister's, uncle's son; he's a lawyer. And then you see, you think they want to give back to you, that they've all contributed to make it happen, and that person becomes the pride of their family.

So I went to Our Lady and St. Kizito's. It's in Ede. It's in another state completely from my own home state, Kwara state. And it's a Yoruba land. It's also in Yoruba land. My two sisters went to school in the north, St. Louis in Kano. The tumult, the turbulence kind of now, we have Boko Haram and all those things have been troubling there. And my brother went to St. Anthony's, which is within the state, but in the capital of our state, away from our hometown, in St. Anthony's.

So I went to Ede, and then my first year I couldn't focus, for one main reason. I didn't like—even though I...as much as I love acting, the aspect of me not being able to stop them from calling me Memunat, I didn't like it. So it constantly brought the memory of what happened in elementary school to my memory, so I couldn't really focus. So I had to repeat a class. I repeated a class, which was my first year. I repeated the first year in my high school, and then continued eventually.

My second year it was like, oh, life was good. I had friends, I had money. Nigeria was very good then. My pocket money, which is collections of money from different family members, my pocket money will be even more than my school fees. And I was...it was a nice time. Except for the name-calling. And eventually I settled for the name-calling and it was like yeah, this is me, kind of.

Mark B. So you finished high school.

John A. I finished high school. During my high school days, I did a lot of readings, and a sense of activism started during my high school days. After I studied history of slave trade and apartheid in South Africa, I became very aware of how human beings oppress each other. I didn't put it in my own context as a sexual minority because even though I knew I was kind of different, and I went through a lot, just seeing myself and a few others did not really put the oppression we were going through, did not make it so vivid to me. But as for any other form of oppression, you know, the school principal being very cruel to the other students, I was very, very anti that.

So my last year in high school we had a change of school principal. Originally, for my first year, we had Father John Adeniyi. Father Adeniyi was not just a priest, he was a father, indeed—very friendly, very open, very sensitive to people's needs, and he knew how to deal with young people in such a way that whatever he wants people to do, they simply do

it and do it right. I just felt yes, he was... So my last year, he was taken out and we had a new priest who became principal. Unlike Father John—because if you went to Father John and said, “Father, I couldn’t find my pen and there’s nothing to write with,” he will open his drawer, give you a pen and tell you, “I’m coming to check you,” and he’ll come and check and make sure you’re doing something with it in the classroom. Or, “We just finished eating in the dining and it’s time for evening studies, but I’m hungry, Father.” He’s got what we call gari, G-A-R-I. Gari is like grits, but it’s made from cassava.

Mark B. Cassava, okay.

John A. And you can soak that in water and sprinkle sugar on it, and it’s food. And it’s part of the food young people take to high school who are in boarding houses, so if the school food is not enough, you can take a little bit of that. So “Father, I’m hungry,” and he will always have it, and he will give. Then you go. If it is sports time, I say, “I can’t go for sport because I am hungry,” he will give you that, go for sport. If it is time for cleaning, because you are the one doing the cleaning, “Father, I need to...” “Why can’t you do it?” “My bucket is leaking.” “Okay, I’m going to loan you this bucket.” He will make sure he provides what will make you function, including the words and the follow-up.

But when Father Adesine Lawrence came, the whole thing changed, and people started living in fear. And what was ringing a bell in my head was

South Africa, where people had no freedom. How could we be having South Africa in independent Nigeria? In this school? No, this won't happen. So it happened one day that he got angry with the school prefect, and he beat the school prefect because the guy couldn't enforce a no noise ban at a particular time. After night prayer, no noise. We go and read. And after evening studies, which would be about 45 minutes, then we'd go to bed. But some people made noise, were making noise instead of doing that. Young boys being young boys. So he came and said the school prefect couldn't enforce that, so he beat him.

And that was where I said—and he has beaten people before. Serious spanking. He beat—I've forgotten the name of the boy, but this was a tiny boy. I think he was in his first year. Father Lawrence did serious lashing for that boy, and the boy got his bucket filled with pebbles and went to the priest's house and started stoning the priest's house. And after he did that—Father didn't say a word. He just stayed inside. After the boy did that, he went to the dormitory, packed his things, and he was gone. God rest his soul, one of my immediate junior in high school, who became a chief justice in one of the states in Nigeria—he's late now—and the other one, Lawrence, is in Belgium now.

Father Lawrence caught them in a room, a recreational room, we called it, where we played ping pong ball. It was at an awkward time. But if not for fear, if it was Father Adeniyi, you could just tell him okay, go on your knees there, or I must not see you here for a certain period of time. Well,

they said he stood at the door, and when these two guys saw him, they were so scared. We don't use...we didn't have this type of window in my high school. We had what you call louvers.

Mark B. Louvers.

John A. Louvers is blades of... And it's like this is your blind. That's what they did. They brought down the old louvers, broke them, and jumped out. That was an extreme fear for young guys to do that. And one in 20 years, so one at 16, 17, then jumped out and just ran away. He didn't beat them eventually. Probably he realized what, you know, this thing was getting out of hand. But when the prefect's own case came up, I was one of those who led our class to revolt against him. So to cut a long story short, my final year in high school, I was not allowed to stay in school before I took my final exam, so I was kind of expelled.

Mark B. Okay, because you were being a rebel?

John A. I was a rebel. I was a rebel. And my dad had a negative reaction to it. My mom was just quiet. My auntie, my mom's elder sister, liked it. She is a Muslim, and she had only one son, and that son died in a motor accident. And people are crazy with grandkids and so on. So when I went to the seminary, she didn't like that, that priests don't marry, they don't have kids. So when I was expelled, she welcomed me.

But the thought of—at that time I was so conscious and very aware of the fact that I just don't want to marry a woman. If I didn't become a priest, what would happen? So after my exams, I went back to school. They allowed me to take my exams. After the exam I went back to school and I went to meet Father Lawrence, and I apologized profusely. And he said, "Why are you offering this apology?" And I said, "Because I want to be a priest." And he said, "Are you sure?" I said yes. And he said, "Okay, when you are ready to go, when you have finally made up your mind and you've spoken to your bishop and he says yes, if you need a letter of recommendation, come back to me and I'll give it to you." I was surprised at that. I was very, very happy. So that was the end of my high school.

The next would be to go to seminary college. We call it major seminary. And then I applied, and the vocation director, an Irish priest, Father Lynch, John Lynch, would not take my application. I eventually went to bishop, who was also Irish, directly, and bishop said, "John, I know your dad. I just want to be sure that this vocation is yours, not your dad's." Because my dad was, oh Lord, my dad and church, he was overly religious. He prays like the Bible, like the Psalms, kind of, like all the time, you know, Psalms, either reading it or not, the prayers are there.

"And it's like I just want to...because I know what happened in your high school." I said yes, my Lord Bishop. And it's like we're having problem with the vocation directors now because they're not sure about you. So okay. And then he recommended that I go away for a year to really think

about it. So I said okay. As I was about leaving his office, he said, “John.” I said, “Yes, my Lord.” We answer “my Lord” to bishops in Catholic church in Nigeria. He had to say yes, Your Excellency. “Where are you going to spend that one year?” And I said Lagos. And it’s like uh-oh, no, no, no. If you go to Lagos, you’re not coming back. [Laughs.]

And it was like, to go and stay in the village with my parents? I was thinking that in my brain. I didn’t want to just come out and say no, I don’t want to stay in the village with my parents, but in my brain I was like are you telling me to go and stay in the village with my parents? I’m grown up and I want to explore the city. And he said why not stay in Ilorin? I-L-O-R-I-N. Ilorin is the capital of my state. And that is where the bishop’s seat is.

Mark B. And the seminary was there?

John A. No, the seminary is in another state.

Mark B. Okay, but that’s where the bishop was.

John A. That was where the bishop was for my own diocese. You know, like stay there, like stay in Chicago instead of going to Springfield, or instead of going to New York. So I’m just like... He said yeah, your mom’s nephew is here. We call him Uncle Ayo. Stay with him. I said okay. So I went to Uncle and said, well, the bishop said I should stay with you. And it’s like, yeah, it’s okay. Even if the bishop didn’t say that.

As family, if I show up at his door, we don't—that's the big difference between America and Nigeria. Any of my relative could just move...come and knock the door, and I open, and I say, well, I've come to stay. I say okay. You know, I have only one bedroom, but you'd need to be sleeping in the couch, say it's okay. And that's why it's not...it's also not too difficult for me to house some of these people seeking asylum.

Anyway, we did. I stayed with him and I started working in the university library as a librarian. I loved the job because I just love walking around pushing the cart. It looks kind of feminine, too. And then a lot of young, beautiful men also come to the library and we eye each other, kind of, and so on. It was a beautiful experience, to the point that at the end of...towards the end of that year, I thought of continuing as a librarian, but I also realized if I should continue as a librarian, the end result would be marriage to a woman. And I thought like I just knew it, no, it's not...this isn't my nature. It wasn't.

So the only escape route I had was the priesthood. But I also desired a priesthood on ground of indigenizing the priests. We had influx of Irish, white missionaries. Bishop, Irish; cathedral administrator, Irish; my parish priest then, Irish. We had Father Felix, and yeah, we had only one Black priest in my own diocese, though, by the time I eventually went—yeah—no-no-no, two, Father Felix and Father Emilius. Father Emilius was ordained in 1979, my last year in high school, and two of them were

supposed to be ordained. One died in a motor accident as he was going home for the ordination, so only one of them was ordained.

Then in 1980—no. So that was 1979 until I went to the seminary, and it was like okay, what will I do? As a kid, instead of being an altar boy I loved to sing in the choir. And when I joined the altar boy briefly because of the gown, priests had problem with that, too, because I couldn't distinguish. I'll be with the choir mentally and physically singing, and they said no, no, you have to be here, bring wine when it's supposed to be, and bring a basket, and bring... But I'd be singing, sing anyway.

So I joined the cathedral choir that one year, and met some beautiful guys there, too. Now for real the guys I know are gay and we had good time. I had a good time, and I was like if I become a librarian, if it is doing something for God, I can just continue my life as a choir member. And those guys are still in the choir, even though they are married now, and they live the true, you know, they are gay privately and they are straight with their wives, kind of.

So I was in the cathedral choir. I also joined the Catholic Youth during that one year. Because bishop just wanted to be able to see me regularly. And he would call. He would come to our house at random. He would just show up at our house. Or call. We had telephone. It was getting improved at that time. Uncle Ayo had phone in his house. He will call to check with him.

Then eventually, at the end of the one year, through the decision of the bishop, not the decision of Father Lynch, I was able to go to the major seminary. Because Father Lynch just insisted that I can't be a good priest since I was expelled. He stuck to that. And I had to send him application letter I think about three times. The third time the bishop told me to bring the letter to him straight, so the bishop was the one who admitted me. He was the one who admitted me to the seminary.

And I went to the seminary college. Oh, another beautiful place. There were people like me there. We had...we go in cassock almost every day. But before I got my cassock, the aspect of name-calling started again.

Mark B. Oh, okay.

John A. How did it happen? Some of us were chosen to take offering up to the sanctuary and to make a procession from either...I think it was the middle of the chapel. It's a long, big chapel filled with boys, and someone observed that I just walked like a girl up there. And later on the guy called, he's like, "Where are you from?" And I said, "From Oro." They didn't call me Memunat, they didn't call me Obirnin. They said oh, this one is Madame Oro.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

John A. So some of them called me Madame Oro, even in my seminary college, Madame Oro. And it was just...you know, glaring. It was during that

time, too, in the '80s, that HIV-AIDS started, and that was one of the things that made me so curious as to start researching what it means to be homosexual, what does the church say. And that was where I first read about the stand of my church on homosexuality, which was a very distressing experience, kind of, for me, because it was like, no, I'm not homosexual. I love men, though. I love the smell of men. I love to touch a man's dick. I love nipples. I just...well, if that makes a person gay, I'm just gay. But I'm not gay. And, you know, it was a period of confusion.

Then the HIV-AIDS thing came, and one of the priests in the seminary Ogumode. I can't only...is his name also Lawrence or whatever? Francis. Father Francis said God is out against the homosexuals, and this is going to exterminate them all through this disease.

Mark B. Disease, mm-hmm.

John A. None of us know how one catches it, other than homosexual sex . So one day the disease control people came to the seminary to do blood tests, and we were all supposed to go there. It was taking place in the auditorium, and everybody was going there. This time I was one of the school typists. The skill I acquired years back. And the typing pool was in the auditorium. So when it was my turn, immediately I left my room, I was in tears, and instead of going there, I simply walked to the copy room and locked myself up there, and I cried and cried.

I had a boyfriend then. We were very sexual. After crying, and they did their thing, they left, I saw him and he was asking me where I was, and I told him, and I cried again, and he cried, and we vow not to be sexual with each other again, and we slept in his bed, and we were sexual again immediately after the vow. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

John A. And we were sexual with each other immediately after that vow of just, you know, not to be destroyed by HIV. We didn't see any example of anyone affected with AIDS, so we were sexual with each other, and then woke up, went back to my room at a point, and then life continued. And I was ordained eventually. I was ordained in 1987.

Mark B. In 1987?

John A. Yeah.

Mark B. Where did the ordination happen?

John A. September 27 in my hometown.

Mark B. In your hometown.

John A. It was a big celebration.

Mark B. A big celebration, I can imagine.

John A. It was. Of course Father...the majority of the priests from my diocese hail from my hometown. So Father Felix, Father Emilius, then Andrew Awotoye and Francis. So then we had three others who weren't from my hometown who were already ordained, so we had altogether seven indigenous.

Mark B. Indigenous priests.

John A. But from my hometown I was the fifth. And each time the whole village, from near and far, would come home, have, actually, a big society kind of dress. Everybody would be in the same kind of dress. And celebration from close and far family, known and unknown people. It was Muslims and Christians. It was a big, always a big celebration. I mean, it was a big celebration. Not to talk of the fact that many people knew my dad. He was baptism godfather to so many kids, to the point that at a point my mom said you have to stop this. *[Laughs.]*

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

John A. You don't even know how many of them. Because, well, he wouldn't buy a gift for them, but he would follow up and he would...you know, he kept record. My mom wouldn't believe he kept record.

Mark B. He kept record of all that.

John A. He was keeping record. Back then I'll say, you know, it's like Dad, she's telling you stop it. You can't be the ready godfather, because... So that

brought many people. Oh, his father was my godfather from Lagos, from the north. It was a big celebration. I had a good time. And then my boyfriend in seminary was there.

Mark B. Was there?

John A. He was there. The night of my ordination we were sexual. And then I was already on way to be a celibate priest. Okay. I didn't know how I was going to really cope with this. How old was I? I was 28, 2007. Yeah, I was 28. Because it was September I was already 28. Yeah. And I had a good time as a priest, to be frank.

Mark B. Where did you serve?

John A. My first appointment was as assistant cathedral administrator. And I wasn't the first black to step into that shoe. Father Francis, God rest his soul, who was my college father in high school, also served as cathedral assistant administrator.

Mark B. Where was the cathedral?

John A. The cathedral was in Ilorin, St. Joseph's. And I was a member of the choir there for the one year I stayed in Ilorin and I made a lot of friends. So I sat there, and the cathedral administrator was an Irish, Father Comboy, Martin Comboy. He's late now. Martin fell sick. He was flown back to Ireland. So I became unofficial administrator. A lot of load on a young person. By the time I finished my first year in the cathedral I fell so sick I was in

the hospital. And then I just made up my mind from the hospital I was not going back there. The stress was just too much.

Mark B. It was too much stress?

John A. It was too much stress. We hold meetings, fundraisers, travels, conflict resolution. It was just too much for a 28-year-old. So I wouldn't go back there. And by that time the Irish bishop was gone. We had my rector in the seminary, in the seminary college, Bishop—is now a cardinal, Archbishop John [Onaiyekan] was the one who ordained me, and I was the first person he ordained in my home diocese where he was the bishop. So he ordained me, and he was kind of proud to have me as an assistant cathedral administrator, and eventually he took me from there, sent me to St. James's Church, which was also within Ilorin, as the pastor there. After one year I became a pastor at St. James's. And I did well. People love my job. People loved my sermon. People respect the fact that they weren't having headache about women loitering around the church, you know, because... Believe it, here, I don't know the way they manage sexuality in their priesthood here. Back in Nigeria, some women are so curious as to question what could be wrong with a virile-looking young man who goes—and I'm not saying they are bad women, but they'll come and really they push themselves forward just to see what was the matter with you.

And of course some women came, and there some actually told me outright we know your type. Yeah, we know your type. One of them compared me with a vicar general. I wouldn't want to put his name in this record. They compared me with a vicar general who was also gay, and doesn't go with, you know, they know. And they said I know your type. I couldn't challenge that or anything. People just simply respect the fact that I was not...they couldn't tie a woman to me.

Mark B. But you liked the work at St. James, it was good?

John A. It was good. The work at St. James's was good. I had how many churches under me, apart from St. James? St. Patrick's, St. Anthony's, St. John and All Saints. When I was in the cathedral, I started All Saints, which was in another town entirely. There was no Catholic church there. So with one woman, Mrs.—we called her Mama Our Shop. The son had a big shop, textile shop in Ilorin and they call it...he named it "Our Shop." All kinds of textile you want to see—lace, material on some, just go there. And then she was a born preacher. And we went to that village and she spoke to people and we got them confused, and they became Catholics. Oh, no, okay, we got them convinced. [*Laughs.*] And they became Catholics, and then we started a Catholic church there. So I started All Saints. But before All Saints, when I was in the cathedral, there was another church, St. John, which was in another village a little further.

So when I left St. James's—the cathedral, St. John and St. Anthony and rather All Saints, St. John's and All Saints insisted on following me to the next parish, so I had all of them. All Saints is now a parish. St. Patrick, that wasn't a parish, also is now a parish with a priest, and St. Anthony's, too. St. Anthony's is where my sister attends now.

So I had good experience at St. James's. The work wasn't stressful politically as cathedral, and I stayed there from 1988 till 1992. When our bishop decided, you know, he just called me and said, well, I want you to become the cathedral administrator. I was like oh my god, going back to that place? And I was the first native cathedral administrator, and I did a good job there, too, for six years, from 1992. Was that six years or eight years? 1992 till 1998. Is that six years?

Mark B. Six years.

John A. That was six years. Until 1998. I left that place end of 1998 for St. Bartholomew. And this time we had a new bishop. Bishop John was gone and we had a new bishop. Actually, it wasn't Bishop John who sent me to the cathedral, it was my new bishop, Bishop Ayo who, when he came in in 1992, he made me the cathedral administrator.

Mark B. And he was the first indigenous bishop?

John A. He wasn't the first indigenous. John Onaiyekan was the first indigenous bishop. But John Onaiyekan also was brought in from another diocese.

Politics of the church. But people love him. He was a learned man, a scripture scholar. Bishop John speaks English, of course, fluently, German, French, Italian fluently. Not only fluently, even in writing. Greek. Latin was like...Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic. [aside] Bishop John was a great scholar.

But when Iyo came, he was from our diocese originally, but like Cardinal George, he was not ordained for Ilorin Diocese. He went to the Dominicans. He was a Dominican priest. So when it was clear that Bishop John was leaving, they were going to make him the archbishop of Abuja, people rallied around to say wait, we have some indigenous, so we want one of our own sons to be a bishop. So we were all young. Even though at that time, if we really explore the possibility, there were some of us who were old enough and learned enough to be bishops. But we still felt no, he is the...Bishop Ayo, we should go and bring him home. So we went to Ibadan and we brought him home. So he was the one who made me the cathedral administrator.

As a priest, I was also the vocation director recruiting people. Then, as a priest, I was a priest in every aspect of it except for celibacy. I had a boyfriend. And I had a good time with this man. Somehow he came to my mind today. I sent him a text message. He's married now and he lectures in the university. I had a good time with that man. He's got good knowledge of sociology. And many times when I prepared my sermon—his name is also John—this guy who called now is also John, my

boyfriend in high school who's a priest now in Archdiocese of Chicago, for whom I came here, John.

Anyway, John would supply the societal concepts that would really bring the sermon home. So there was scarcely any sermon of mine that people did not find relevant to their day-to-day. So it wasn't a heap of Bible quotation or theological quotation. And that reality, the brain work of that reality was John.

Mark B. Good, good. You had mentioned back in your studies you became attracted to studying about justice and oppression. Did that continue as an important part of your ministry?

John A. Oh, yeah, it did. It did. I was politically active. Nigeria had an extensive unfortunate opportunity of being under military rule. And it got to a state it became so ridiculous and disturbing that people started revolting against the military. And the church, in my diocese, I was one of those people. And for most of the time I was a lone voice in it. People, some people don't like me for that, because it was like talking about corruption. It features prominently in my sermon.

Mark B. It's in your sermon, okay.

John A. Yeah. In my sermon all the time. My final year—no, my last two years in the cathedral we had a military administrator that was sent to my own state who was Catholic. And I don't know where the governor of Illinois lives.

Mark B. Ostensibly in Springfield.

John A. Well, in our own situation, his house was not far from our bishop's house. In fact you can walk. It's like turn the corner and you'll be in the governor's house, a big mansion. And it's not within the geographical area of the cathedral, but he chose to come to the cathedral, for whatever reason. And we scarcely see eye-to-eye because of my sermon.

Mark B. But you still preached the sermon even though he was there.

John A. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I still do it. And we weren't just friendly. I do go to his house to say mass because we were required to. You know, say well, since he's always a busy person, actually sometime we'll go to his house and say Mass there for him, and he will attend. He appeared to be a very pious Catholic. One thing that push me off the cliff with him was the year we had water problem in my state, and then in the capital we had a dam.

Mark B. You had a what?

John A. Water dam. The river was—

Mark B. Oh, a dam.

John A. to be able to, you know, supply water. And they got a kind of grant, I think either from IMF or wherever, that was going to dredge the dam, expand it and strengthen it and just renew it, and if they did that, it would be able to supply water for drinking and irrigation to a radius of hundred

miles. It wasn't a big state. A radius of hundred miles. That thing always get me emotional [*unintelligible.*] And instead of doing the project, they share the money. They share the money. So I heard about it.

So he found his way to the church around that time, and I decided to preach about it. And I mentioned it, but...And at a point I was so angry that I started raining curses, all those who live the public drinking dirty water, and their children, who have this—you know, all evil thing I could just say. I just didn't care again. And that was around the time Kudirat Abiola was killed.

Mark B. Who was killed?

John A. Kudirat Abiola. She was one of the wives of one of the guys who contested presidency when Babangida was going to transition. Babangida was a military ruler. He was going to transition his country from military to civilian. And Mashood Abiola...two parties were formed in Nigeria at that time, STP and ATP or whatever, but he belonged to STP. And this man was Yoruba. But he was liked from the coast to the desert, to the Sahara Desert, by Nigerians. He won the election, and the election was annulled.

That thing got me so angry, and it was like, well, I am a priest, no wife, no kids, if I die, what am I going to lose? And if those who have kids who are dying, who was I to just sit back? So I was one of those priests who became so vocal that in my own diocese I was the only one who came out

and... And I know in Nigeria, it's a kind of peculiar country. And I will think the long years we spent under the military rule has killed our sense of rights, that people just go for whatever they are given. We were used to being ruled by decrees. They just go for whatever was given.

So myself and this guy, we had this real clash. The final clash I had with him also was in the church. Press would come, would always be around to hear what John has to say. Apart from that, since there was no other support, there was nothing I could do on the street. So he came to church one independent day towards the end of my stay in the cathedral.

And suddenly—if he was coming, we will hear about it in advance. It was on Saturday. I heard of it. Instead of hearing of it, say maybe like Monday, so that we get prepared, we know that the SSS and all the secret police will be around and we'll see strange faces, and we're not wondering what someone is doing in a conspicuous place, but he just made a decision, as the military do. They don't think, they just act. Shoot and shoot. He made a decision to come to the cathedral and it was like, oh.

And I had already prepared my sermon. Because we were going to have independent thanksgiving, my sermon was also really focused on telling Nigerians to wake up, to be, you know, to let us build a country to stop...corruption is second nature of Nigeria. You must have heard of scam email from Nigeria. All those things. It was just too much. And

that was already in my sermon. And to tell people, look, these military people need to go. Even the Catholic bishops have all agreed on that.

So I don't know what happened. My bishop just called me and is like, eh... No, I called him and I told him, say would you want to come and say Mass in the cathedral tomorrow because the governor is coming for independence celebration. And he said no, he was already scheduled to go to St. John's Adewole for confirmation, and it was just too late, he wouldn't want to cancel it. So I said okay.

Then he called me back on the phone and said how is your sermon for tomorrow, and I said it's prepared. Then he kept quiet. He didn't say anything. Then he called me again and said can you drive to my house now. It was...this would be around 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. at night. I said yes, my Lord. Okay, if your bishop calls, you just have to go. We Catholics, we follow the military kind of thing in the church hierarchy. A bishop says stand up, you stand up, sit down, you sit down.

So I went to his house and he gave me the Catholic bishop's communiqué that came out against military rule strongly. And I read it, and I felt that was even better than my sermon. So I got home, I read it over and over and over, to the point that I was almost able to recite it word for word.

When I got to church the following day, the first Mass I pull it out, the governor came for a second Mass. Oh, Lord. I pull it out like I wrote it. He was mad. So towards the end of the Mass he sent Mr. Telagu—Mr.

Telagu was my senior in high school. He didn't go to the seminary, but he was my senior, and that one, he was a church p-r-o, so that one came up and said the governor wanted to talk. And I said oh, really? Tell him during the announcement we create space for him.

So he came up, picked the microphone, and instead of addressing people or wishing them happy independent day, be good, he was talking about me. He was so angry as, you know, those who are power drunk simply because they are cathedral administrator, and he just went on and on, on and on, on and on. I felt like confronting him, and I guess it was like... because after I did the sermon, people stood up... [*Applauds.*]

Mark B. And applauded, uh-huh.

John A. They applauded. Himself and his entourage, all of them sat down during that time. So he just went on and on. And then at a point it was like we have another Mass, so it was time to wrap it up. So eventually he gave me the microphone. When I gave him the microphone initially, the press took pictures. When he gave it back to me, they took the pictures, and the following day we were at the back of, I think it was, *Punch*, and it was reported that he came up and smacked the microphone, but he didn't do that. He didn't. Well, they said he smashed the microphone. And it became a big thing. It was...it became a really big thing.

And the archbishop of Lagos then, Anthony Okogie, he's retired now, called me around 1:00 a.m. and said I heard what you did, good job. He

was always encouraging me. And it was like don't be surprised if your bishop move you from the cathedral. And I told him, said, Your Grace, to be frank, I'm already tired of the cathedral. And to be frank, at that time I was kind of tired of preaching. I was tired of preaching because it's like... I don't know what I was expecting. Probably I thought I'll be a Jonah, say okay, repent, and if not, Nineveh will be destroyed and people will just... Probably I was expecting that.

But it was like I will tell people you don't cheat in the market. When you do that, you're oppressing your fellow human being. Either he is rich or poor. If you impose a double price on a good for that person, you're oppressing him, you're making life hard for him. You don't buy stolen goods and so on. I could do this, and you see them do like this, and they're all shaking their heads, and they just all say yeah, I'm truly sorry and I'll never do it again. And then I go to the community and then the complaint will continue, and people still do it. Not to little each other as judgment-wise, but still to other people, and it was like no, this isn't working, I don't think I can do this anymore.

So I was tired of cathedral. I wanted somewhere so small, probably a farming area where, you know, people will steal, maybe they will steal each other's corn and then we'll, you know. I just...I was tired of it. So when he told me I may be moved, I just felt it's okay. Just get me out of this place. At the same time I was struggling with the thought of my

sexuality. I was afraid if the military got wind of it, that would be something they could use against me.

We still don't know how it happened. Around that same time I was to travel for a meeting in the north, and John had a friend, and John's friend—it was during evening Mass. John was at morning Mass. The friend came for evening Mass and the friend gave me a bag, say would you keep this bag for me till after Mass. So John took the bag, brought it to the rectory, and left it there. In that bag was a gun. He didn't open it. Now, after Mass, the guy who gave him the gun left, so John passed the bag to my nephew.

We have the house, then we have what we call boys' quarter. It's an attached...and if a priest have a family member living with him, the guy stays there. So the thing was in the boys' quarter. I don't know how anyone got to know where it was. In short, the police came to raid, to raid the church, and they found the gun. How did you get it? Mr. John gave it to me. How did you get it? You know, it was like... The news was going, and oh, like I was becoming a militant, I had a gun. Well, I didn't give anybody gun. I didn't even know about it.

John himself had forgotten about it because we traveled and we were away when... I had a driver, but each journey we went, John was always there to go with me, and the three of us would exchange the driving. We don't have fast train or commercial plane going from place to place in Nigeria.

We have commercial planes now, but at that time no train, no real bus; you need to have your own car to... We were there when I got a call that they found a gun. Where? And John was like, "They must have planted that in your house." Then, when they traced the whole thing, it got back to him. "He didn't tell me the content. He only told me to hold it. And I gave it to..." He gave it to my own nephew, Francis, because we were traveling the following morning, so that if the guy who gave it to him comes, the boys will give it to.

So we thought like I was on. I was scared. We cried together in the hotel we stayed, and we consoled each other with good sex after that. Then, eventually, it was like what do we do now? I said, we'll still sit here. If it is death, let's go. Whatever will happen, we'll go home. Eventually we went back home, and the whole situation was taken care of by the church members, and they were going to expose, some people were going to expose the source of the gun, and the whole thing just died like that.

Because it was from the government. And it was kind of clear how, you know... I knew my life was in danger a lot of times there, but I just...it's like what did I do? I preach. And I was bold at that. I preach. And my family will come and say, well, you're too mellow. I still say mellow, you know. What happens then? Don't let these people, you know, the military can easily kill you, they can do this, and that's like... I have no mother. I had a father, and he was old. My dad was already in his 90s then. And if I die, what will...what is there? People die, you know.

Oscar Romero was an inspiration to me at that time, and I watched the movie and over, and compared injustice there with us. The difference was that in their own case they were active, the people generally were active, they were speaking out against it, while, in my own case, people, it's like what's wrong with him? He got so he's telling us not to...this is how we do business, kind of. If your brother was the governor, why don't you take government money to kind of... Why you steal government money? It's your money. It's people's money. You'll be rich, you make people poor.

And when you're a so rich man in the community, and you have all these poor people, you can't really claim you are rich because everybody is looking up to you to dish out something. Unless you really want to be very wicked and you don't give anything out, which some of them do. They take the money from Nigeria and take them to Swiss bank. Thank God the world came up with, you know, to stop that now, that you can't say that they're not doing it. You know, and I was kind of, I was very much involved in that, and then in the politics, the priest politics, but when it comes to activism, I was in that.

But as for LGBT activity, no. There was no trouble then against LGBT community. No. In the '80s, even in most of '90s. There were pockets of arrests here and there, but we don't even see visible gay person, even though we who are gay, we know each other. Almost every gay guy I know, if they are not priest, they are married. They were married. They

had their wife. Some had wives who were never satisfied. I knew a family member who had two wives and people contest the legitimacy of their children because he was not just there. But he had the money to have this woman to add more [*unintelligible*] to cover himself. But my problem, after I left the cathedral, I was at St. Bartholomew.

Mark B. You were sent where?

John A. St. Bartholomew. It's a very small town, and I thought I'll have peace there. But it's very close to the Nigerian border with the Republic of Benin, and where we have a main border entrance, you can imagine those over there. The military were there, the police were there, immigration was there, and custom, the four legs of corruption in Nigeria that makes the table really stand so that nothing you put on it is falling away. They were there extorting money from poor people. So it was like I ran away, I just wanted to have some peace, and I had to go back to the same thing.

So myself and one pastor of a Four Gospel Square were very, very vocal against these people. Some of them were my church members. And they'll come and tell me, you know, "Father, you know, the way you talk sometimes, people are even complaining in the community." Either I'll say Mass in the main parish or I go to the farm areas. I will mention the activities and how wrong, and how people should resist them. So one day I went to the... We had... A priest in Nigeria is a priest, is a teacher, is a paramedic, and I'll just put it together. One of the people was sick from

the out stations in their farm, so a message was sent. So I drove there, got this man in my car and brought him to the clinic.

And then I saw the wife of the Four Square pastor. I said, “Ah, Madame, how are you doing?” “Oh, I’m fine, Father John.” Say, “Okay, and how is Reverend?” And she said, “He is in there.” When I went in, after my patient was admitted—it was a kind of dormitory, not a private room, of course, American luxuries, private room or two people in a room. In our own case it’s man ward, beds are lined up. There was this guy who had bandage all over. I could see blood even still coming from this bandage. And he tried to reach out to me. And I went over, to be frank. I prayed with him. He couldn’t talk. So I left.

So when I saw the wife of this pastor, Reverend Akpan, and he told me my friend was in there, and she just turned and walking away like you [*unintelligible*] kind of, I went back and I looked around, and I didn’t see my friend. I thought he came to greet the patient. When I didn’t see him, I went back out. I was going to get into my car. Then I saw her again and said, “Oh, well, tell him I looked for him and I didn’t see him.” And she said, “Well, you might not recognize him if you see him.” I said, “Oh, what’s going on?” “He was attacked.”

He had no car like me. He was in a public vehicle returning from the capital of my state to that little village, and some people stopped the bus, singled him out, beat him, matted him, left him for dead. They didn’t

take...it wasn't a matter of armed robbery. They took nothing. And they didn't attack any other person. He was the only one. So I saw him, and it was like, oh, Lord, this is dangerous. My mind was on his wife, and I think he's got about five little, little kids. And all those kids, what will happen to them if this man dies? That was on my mind.

And I was...I had been warned, too. Even before I left Ilorin. One of the SSS lady working in the government house came to my house one night in the guise of wanting to arrange baptism for her new baby. The truth was in my office, when I was still the cathedral administrator, and she was the one who told me that the secret service discussed my case almost every time they hold a meeting, to the point that they were talking of threatening me. They didn't say they're going to kill me, but if we shoot his car, that will scare him and probably keep him shut, and that I should be careful, telling me when to go out, telling me not when to go out, and don't stay out late. If anyone comes to check you at night, be sure you know the person before you open the door, and all kinds of things. Tell your nephews because people know your nephew live here. Tell your nephew where to...

It was like this was becoming too much. Luckily my nephew that year gained admission to university and left, so it was just John and myself. And sometimes I stay...we stay in the rectory. Other times we stay in John's own place. So when this happened it was like, hm, I had walked close to this before. Could this have happened to me, too? But my

concern was if they know I'm gay, if they know I'm homosexual, that could be bad. That was one of my major concern.

As the cathedral administrator, too, someone slipped a paper, a pamphlet under my door one year, and it spoke about special therapies in America that could turn you to a straight guy. I was like...I felt like exploring it. Which was what really brought me to America. So I left Bartholomew. In the Catholic priesthood, back in Nigeria then, after ten years, a priest is entitled to a year of sabbatical, as they call it. And after working and then 2000 and...no, 1999, I had already spent 12 years as Catholic go for annual leave. I was really pressed with a lot of responsibility. And I said I want to go and have some, you know. And after I saw Akpan I just feel like, you know, all this and it's a waste of time. Nigeria cannot be converted. Well, let me just go and take care of my own homosexuality.

So where do you...I was asked where I wanted to go because I was overdue, and maybe if you go you can stay two years before you come back. And then there was opportunity of going to Ireland. Then the opportunity of coming to U.S. came, you know, within that. So I left St. Bartholomew eventually, and that was how I landed here. What really troubled me about my own sexuality wasn't, again, the law or anything, but Paul's word, homosexuals, adulterer and so-so-so-so, will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Even though I was worried that it could be used against me by the military government, the thought of after all these good things I'm doing, I pay people's kids, their school fees, I will spend time

in family houses settling conflicts, take communion to home bound old people and young people sick, and I didn't embezzle church money.

Yeah, but this problem, I have relationship with John.

And frankly speaking, if I know what love is, I know I love that guy. He, just like the guy in my elementary school, when I think about him, each time he was around, I was excited. I was more myself. To the point at one time my nephew said, well, one of you is the husband, one of you is a wife. When you're talking of mother and father, I think I see that in the two of you. Because if he wanted anything, and I was slow at giving, he knows where to go.

And what does, you know, what Francis wanted would be like my shirt. We were about—he grew fast and we're about the same size, and it's like he'll tell him I like that shirt. And to be frank, I was a flamboyant dresser. I love to dress well and, you know, make sure I appear good all the time. Say I want that shirt. Say no, don't touch my shirt. I'm not your father. Then once, but, you know. And then he will have whatever he wanted.

[Part 2.]

Mark B. This is Mark Bowman. It's January 18, 2015 here at my home in Chicago, and we're interviewing again John Ademola Adewoye. And John, when we left off before, you were about to take a sabbatical and you were looking at change ministries, and you were about to leave. And so if you

want to pick up with the decision you made on where to go and where you moved on from there. Thanks.

John A. Thanks again for giving me this opportunity to put down something for the good of everybody, and to my own pride as well, because some people have challenged me to try and put things to writing. And I'm not just...I write other things, but I don't know, I've tried to write my story. The best I've done with it has been to speak, you know, to have it recorded as we're doing now, or to sketch maybe a page or two for some people.

Mark B. You do it very well. You speak very clearly and you tell the story well, John, so thank you.

John A. Thank you. You're welcome. So I decided to leave Nigeria early 1999, and my opportunity was...it came through the sabbatical, which I was overdue for. And the question was where would I go for sabbatical. I thought about Ireland, and I really wanted to visit Ireland because the bishop who assisted me to get into the seminary was an Irish guy. Even though he was late, I still felt like just visiting his grave. And up to now I still nurse that ambition to visit and visit, you know, visit his grave because he did a lot to assist me to eventually get into the seminary. That's what was on my mind.

Then I remembered that I had seen a pamphlet around 1997, when I was still the cathedral administrator, that, I don't know, someone pushed it under my door. And it was for the opportunity of reparative therapy here

in the U.S. After reading that paper, I throw it. I just didn't want any other person to see it. And that was how secretive I was about my sexual orientation, even when most of my brother priests and some of my very close family members and friends know. I was just too scared, confused and sad to really look at it in the face and talk about it. So I throw that paper.

Then, in 1999, my mind went back to it, and between...my option came between Ireland and America. To be frank, generally speaking, with my nationalism mentality, based on my personal...the personal influence, my story of slave trade, and effect that had on me, I saw Africa as my home, and I had made up my mind to live there all my life, to put in my best into, you know, whatever I'm doing there for the good of everyone. But the same home had no therapy for an LGBT person. Hence, it is available in America. And then I decided okay, I'll go to America. How do I make it to America?

My high school very close friend John Atoyebi is a priest here in the Archdiocese of Chicago, and we were close even after he became a priest. The first time he came back to Nigeria, we were together, and he was back several times. And I then contacted him and he said yeah, you can come to Chicago. So he put everything in motion, and I was invited to the Archdiocese of Chicago. I declared every paper and every good intention except my intention to go for reparative therapy. And I came here. Well, John is well aware of the fact that I am gay. He knows that. And when I

came, I stayed with him. We stayed together for one full year. And during that one year I was busy scouting around, looking for the therapy.

I left Nigeria December 13, 1999 and I arrived in the United States of America December the 14th. We had Christmas, the New Year. My search started 2001—no, 2000. And the opportunity I had was that I...it was like, okay, for a whole year you're going to be here. I had what they call R1 visa, which is a religious worker's visa, which gives me opportunity to work in the United States of America with the religious organization that invited me. So it was like okay, what would you do? Back home in Africa, in Nigeria, right from the time I was ordained September 27, 1987, till I left, visiting hospital and sick people who were home and the old people was part of...was kind of my major passion. So it was in the process of that that clinical pastoral education was introduced to me.

And in the light of the clinical pastoral education, I was able to really go deep into self-examination. I met another person...it was through that process I met another person here in U.S., Rev. Ed Stiver, who happened to be a gay man, a beautiful African American man. We spoke a number of times and I got to know, you know, many other places. But I did not declare to any of them my intention, and I was still searching. Then the opportunity came... I heard about this or that group, the banned group, but I didn't see any of their place here in Chicago. And apart from that, by the time I discover that it was not Catholic, I was really careful because I

didn't want to venture into another denomination and then be raising question of what I was looking for there.

So well, in that process, you know, through reflections, personal reflections during the clinical pastoral education, I decided to talk to a Jesuit priest. And one thing this priest did for me was to take my story as I told it, and to help me really see the truth in myself, and to help me see the possible and the impossible about being converted from being gay to a straight man or being converted from a straight man to being gay. I saw that. The whole thing generated a kind of pain for me that it was not possible. And I felt remaining in the Catholic priesthood would continue to encourage it.

Then I met a lady. She was an ex-nun. And that happened when my bishop came here 2001 for a kind of back surgery. This lady used to know...she was his friend, my bishop, Ayo Maria Atoyebi. This lady was his friend. She happened to be a medical doctor now in the U.S. And then we met and it was like yeah, we clicked. And for the first time in my life it was like okay, I was going to have a relationship with a woman. And then we spoke, we did everything, and it was like, yeah, I think I can live my life with you.

We did it from early...late 2000, I believe, or early 2001, back and forth. She'll visit Chicago and she comes from Maryland most of the time. I visited her in Maryland once. And I was still a priest, though. By that

time, though, my mind was completely out. So going along with her was kind of, unfortunately, manipulative on my own side, because I was actually looking for a reason I could give to leave the priesthood. Apart from that, I felt going with her would also solve my problem, not just create a reason. But finding a reason was one of that.

Well, for the whole time we dated, even when we share bed, we never shared sex. And I don't know, only God knows her sexual orientation. But I wouldn't want to delve into that. But at a point I felt well, she might not be too different from me, except in the other way, and I will like to leave it at that. Eventually we decided to part because my family got to know about it, and the bishop got to know about it, and it was like it was common kind of knowledge, and it's like okay, we decide to part.

But by the time we parted, I had already made up my mind, because by... You know, parting from her actually gave me the courage—rather, interacting with her gave me the courage to really know my true nature. It was one of, I will say, the second groundbreaking experience, apart from the fact that the Jesuit priest made me understand the fact that the reality of a person is simply born this way. So we parted, and by the time we parted I had made up my mind I will just live my life as a gay man. But I did not really decide then, right then, to leave the priesthood.

Mark B. Where were you living then? Were you still living with your priest friend?

John A. I had moved out of his own place and moved to St. Thomas the Apostle in Hyde Park. And I was still working at the University of Chicago Hospital as a chaplain, where I work even today. So I decided okay, when I go back to Nigeria, I will love to start a ministry for LGBT people. What inspired that was that John told me about AGLO. AGLO is an archdiocesan gay and lesbian outreach. And just truly, it took me some time to visit.

I met another guy online as a priest. I went online. It was through AOL, “you got mail”. I met this guy and he put—I think he was 72 years old. And then he put his picture. And if he did not put his picture, I would simply, I will have approached him outside as a white guy. He lived in Oak Park. And again, at that time I was still struggling with the possibility of something we just break up one day and I start being gay. And then I decided to visit him. He’s late now. The guy died. His name is Bob. I can’t easily recollect his last name, but we call him Bob.

I visited Bob. He cooked. A very good cook. His house is very little, a senior house. He was married. He had about six or so kids, and he happened to be a Catholic, of course. And I look. I said, wow, you have six kids, you must be a very faithful Catholic. You know, no family planning. Once you score in Catholic thing, they expect you to keep the baby. And they were all grown and gone, so he was by himself. We met a number of times.

And then he told me about AGLO again. It was then he came out to me and told me he was a married deacon. All the while we were meeting, he didn't know I was a priest. And I met other guys like that. And that was another advantage I got of self-empowerment I got from being on the Internet. I met some other guys like that. And he told me about AGLO. And I remembered that John told me.

So one day I just decided to go for the Mass, and I went, and it was like I wanted to go every Sunday. Even when I was scheduled to have evening Mass at St. Thomas, Mass at AGLO starts at 7:00, and the St. Thomas Mass I think start, the Sunday evening mass starts at 6:00, I believe. By 6:45 I was done. And if the police wanted to make money by issuing me speed ticket, they will have, because from Hyde Park, Lake Shore to Mt. Carmel on Belmont, it took me no time, just *shooo*. I just wanted to be there. And it was very, very empowering for me. So I felt, okay, I'll go home and I'll start this ministry. And then I came out to my bishop. It was like no-no-no.

Mark B. You came out to your bishop online, or in a phone call, or letter, or...?

John A. I wrote him a letter.

Mark B. Wrote him a letter, okay.

John A. So it was kind of difficult for him to believe. All of them I shocked because when I came out, I came out in a really big way. I sent email to

people, I sent hard copy letters to some people, and I called some people. And as it normally played out, I lost some friends. One of my closest friends, we parted since then. I still say hi to him, but if I did not, he wouldn't say hi to me. Was Felix. Felix Dada was a very good friend of mine from high school. It was not a sexual thing. We were just fond of each other. And we went to the junior seminary, but he did not go to the seminary to pursue the priesthood, so he was married, and we still remain friends.

And actually, Felix assisted me with helping me to save some of the money I made here and invest the money in Nigeria. The money he made for me in Nigeria, I still have. Have it to fall back to even up till now from time to time. It's yielding on its own. But the moment I came out to Felix, he was the only one who really wrote—well, himself and my sister, Josephine Ajiboye, wrote me letters. But not letters, I will say. Felix wrote only one, but five pages of how this may break our friendship, or how it may retain it, how God is against it, how African tradition is against it. He went on and on. Anyway, I lost Felix and some other friends. Some family members stayed away. And a good number of them are back, except Felix.

Well, I told my bishop about it, and that when I returned to Nigeria, back to what I will have done as a priest if I was allowed to remain, that I will start a ministry for the LGBT people. And I felt a voice of reluctance in him, and then thought to myself, you know what, the actual bishop who

ordained me was then, and still, as we're calling, the archbishop of Abuja is now a cardinal. And I thought, you know, if my bishop, Ayo Maria, a very, very overly spiritual guy, will not see the need for this ministry, Archbishop John should see it. So I went to him. And he was disappointed that I was gay, but he was open to possibility of me starting the ministry in the archdiocese of Abuja.

And frankly speaking, gay population, concentration was small in Abuja than any other place, Abuja, Lagos. The major cities in Nigeria, because Internet was there, to really do a little bit of survey, Abuja, Lagos, Onitsha, Benin. Like people would just run away from their village and go and get lost in the city. And that was what I saw.

And then later on he came back and he was giving excuses and so on, and it was like... For me, I just couldn't understand why people go that way. He remembered how a high school teacher of his almost molested him and all those things, and it was like, okay. This time I've come to know the difference between a pedophile and a gay person and heterosexual person, and these things cut across the line. What excuse. And eventually he...I saw that reluctance in him.

And then, at the same time, a series of physical persecution of LGBT, gay priest started in Nigeria, particularly in the west. A friend of mine who was a lecturer in the seminary, they discovered he was gay. He was taken out of the seminary. He was sent back to his diocese. The way they just

started treating people. And that was someone who didn't even come out publicly. Now talk of myself, who had put on a rainbow shirt, kind of, through my emails and my American life. So I just felt, now if I should go back, I could be subjected to this. I could be driven back to the closet. No. Let me die on the street, feeling the breeze of freedom from over 40 years of self-imprisonment in closet of fear.

So I decided I was going to leave the priesthood. And I told my bishop and he didn't believe it. He told me—he came—he was here in U.S. when I, you know, visiting then and I told him. He said I should go and put it in writing. Of course computer is there, it's really easy. *Rrrr, boom-boom-boom.* I gave it to him. And he left. And then I started my preparation. Where will I move to if I leave, where will my last Mass be, and all those things. And I find a house, I told my director at work. I received some support from my work. If that is what you want to do, it wouldn't stop you from doing your...my chaplaincy and so on. We have laypeople who are doing chaplaincy and so on. It will be a big change. People will know. I won't be able to say Mass at work again. People will call me Father John and all those things.

I just felt the priesthood I acquired, but being gay, I did not acquire that. And the freedom to live my life as a gay man should not be inhibited by my desire for the priesthood. So I just felt I'll just keep going. I'll keep going. And probably it was just a coincidental thing also. I had a dream around that time. I found myself in a really big pond, and my mom, who

has been dead for years, was at a show and she simply said, hey John, don't stop, just keep moving. So I kept moving, and eventually I got out of the pond. And when I woke up I just thought probably my mom was telling me, you know, it's okay, just keep moving. If you want to move on, just move on. Don't stay there and sink in the pond. And that was what I did.

Mark B. Did you have a last Mass? Did you do some kind of ceremony to sort of mark giving up the priesthood?

John A. No, I didn't do any ceremony. Of course my last Mass was—I moved out of St. Thomas the Apostle and I moved to Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, which is also on the South Side of Chicago, on 87th and Exchange or Commercial. It's a big, big church. Each time I drove past the place with guys in my car I say that was where I said my last Mass. And I'm going to take a picture of that church one of these days. So I moved out. I moved to the same neighborhood and I continued with AGLO, going to AGLO. Actually, before I left the priesthood, I said Mass for AGLO.

Mark B. You did say Mass for AGLO, okay.

John A. Yeah, once. And it was just a memorable and joyous day for me, and I wish I could stay on as a priest and be open and be able to continue such a ministry, but it was impossible. So I then moved out and continue working.

Mark B. What year is this?

John A. This was 2003.

Mark B. 2003.

John A. That was 2003. So since 2003 I've been out. I went back to school because I really wanted to distance myself from pastoral care. I went back to school and acquired a master's in social work. But my heart for pastoral care still remains. So I continued as a chaplain and start the support of LGBT people as a social worker.

And that was what eventually—well, and then I...2004 I started dating a guy. 2005 we moved in with each other. We lived in Hyde Park for some time. From Hyde Park we moved to South Shore, and from South Shore, 2005, I bought my house in Riverdale. And we lived together, David Knight and myself lived together in Riverdale for six months before he decided to move out and be away.

So I started, 2003 I started a master's of social work through Dominican University. And when that one was becoming too expensive, it was like okay, I have to probably sell my pants to pay this, I decided to stop. Then I discovered Chicago State University, and then I went to Chicago State University, where I finished the program May of 2006. And shortly after I finished, David decided to leave, and life was kind of lonely. But as he left, it was...even though I had been kind of talking with African LGBT

and trying to encourage people before then, it was after he left that I started the Facebook Courage Nigeria.

Mark B. Had you gotten asylum then? What was happening?

John A. No, I had not gotten asylum.

Mark B. You stayed on a student visa?

John A. What happened was that after my R1b expired, I didn't not apply for a student visa. I had a very, very understanding director at work, Ellen Rosendale. She moved to Children's Memorial, and I think she's no more there now as the director of social work. Or probably she's still there. I think she should still be there. Well, she was very, very understanding. She then pushed for University of Chicago Hospital to obtain H1b visa for me for two years. My first visa was from 1999. It was for four years, 1999 to 2001 or 2002. So we went on H1b after that, and H1b was renewed twice. The third time she made the attempt of getting the green card for me, but some people kicked against it at work. I don't know if they were Catholic.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

John A. Well, I...I mean, that's work politics. Well, they kicked against it. It was then someone told me about the asylum thing, and it was like aha, okay. So I explore the aspect of the asylum, and by 2006, 2007 I got my asylum.

Mark B. Was that a difficult process?

John A. Emotionally it was a difficult process. It was a difficult process emotionally because I had to actually sit down and go through the history of my life, the struggle to be gay. And it was all the challenges I faced. As I said earlier on, the childhood experiences, and all those things. But even now, in a renewed form, the re-pain of the misunderstanding of the church regarding my sexual orientation and the silence of God around that. There was a day I was in my lawyer's office and they were talking about this, and suddenly I was moved to tears. It was like... It was emotionally draining. And then I wasn't sure if I would be granted or not.

Anyway, by the time my lawyer went online and put my name there, I believe I had enough experience to create a big resume for the immigration people to say John, we have no doubt you are gay and we know, really, returning to Nigeria will be very, very dangerous for you because it happened to be that it was 2006 the same-sex prohibition marriage law process started in Nigeria. It started and some of us were against it, and I was one of those who just felt what do I have to lose if I come out boldly against it, and openly? I was one of the few people who came out boldly and openly against it. I wrote a lot of rejoinders to different publications in Nigerian papers.

And thanks to God for the inspiration, the word got through Internet. It doesn't take time for such to be published, you know, they were out there.

And my lawyer, looking for evidences, pulled some of them, and some of the responses people gave. Say well, we know you're in the U.S.A. If you come back to Nigeria, we're going to kill you, we're going to...all kinds of stupid things people wrote. They don't know me. I don't think they...unless those who are really, really close to me. I didn't hear such from those who are close to me, or I don't know, not inside the kingdom of heaven. Those were...it got to a point I had to tell one of them, my sister, say when you get there, you will miss me, you know, in hell, but in heaven, I'll be there. [*Laughs.*]

So, you know, they got enough evidence. We went in and eventually I got my asylum. I think I got the whole thing settled by 2007. So 2008 I went for my green card without a waste of time. And then eventually, last year, I went for citizenship and I got my citizenship. But having gotten my own, I was very aware of the situation in Nigeria. But the thought of people fleeing did not really register with me.

Mark B. So you started Courage Nigeria, the Facebook group.

John A. Yeah, I started Courage Nigeria on Facebook.

Mark B. And what were you doing with Courage Nigeria?

John A. Courage Nigeria stood out for Nigerian LGBT people to know that they are not alone and to be, you know, it was created to be a channel to give courage people to come to some acceptance, to even come open to, you

know, make their political views known. Courage Nigeria on Facebook was never a closed group, so those who came in there knew they were out in a way. And I receive...I had tons of friends on it—men, women, single, and married. When I say married, I mean those who are married to other men or women. And almost every day up till now, Courage Nigeria is still existing. Up to now I still provide people with listening presence through that channel. It doesn't cost money.

Mark B. It's your time. It costs your time.

John A. It does. It takes a lot of time.

Mark B. That's your ministry.

John A. Yeah. If I will do that for money, I bet I'll be a rich therapist. But my shirt is still this pale shirt. And I'm glad that I was available. I'm glad that I'm available for people through that. So then living here, after David left, I was all by myself. I think 2007 or so I got to know a guy from Zambia, and at a point he was losing his accommodation. And I said, you know, I have extra two bedrooms, why not come and stay? And then he came and stayed. We had a quarrel eventually, and he had to move out, which was a kind of painful experience for him and for me, and we didn't talk for quite a while. Eventually we reconciled and we became good friends again.

I feel so proud of him, even up till now, because he's now among all the African LGBTs and persons I know in Chicago. He's the only one who's married and settled. The rest of us are still looking and mingling. We are still single, looking and mingling. So, you know, Ed is married and he's a lucky guy. And then, after him, another person came. Of course they say Nigerian, but born with American citizenship. He was to train as a flight attendant somewhere in Rockford, and he did that. Then, eventually, he stayed in my house as he worked with different air organizations. And then he moved on, but before he moved on, the problem in Nigeria had started, and people were just looking for somewhere to go.

And then one of the Nigerian gay community members here introduced someone to me who came from Nigeria. His uncle processed his papers. The uncle lived in St. Louis. And then he went there, and when they were focusing too much on him, you know, the way he walks, the way he likes to do people's hair and so on, it was like okay, what do I do, and how do I get my stay. They were going to force him into marriage in Nigeria, actually. That was, you know, one of his complaints, and when he saw the opportunity to come. So he too stayed in my house.

Then the second person came into the same house. Then last year was a big surge. I eventually had seven people in the house. By the time the second person... when the second person was preparing to come, I had made up my mind to start a program that would focus on LGBT asylum seekers. Courage Nigeria, there were other groups called Courage

Nigeria, and then Courage America, Courage this, Courage that. So I thought of Center for Integration of Courageous Living for the asylum seekers, and my thought was that Courage Nigeria will also be incorporated into that, and then I'll continue the ministry. So more people came into the program.

As colleagues, a black man, apart from the fact that I'm also a foreigner, finding funding for that was difficult. I was never married. I had no kids. And then I let people know. Housing, you have no problem, feeding, you have no problem, but I won't able to get you money to go and do your hair or go for manicure or pedicure and all those things, or buy extra shirts. But you can live in my house for free.

And then people came in, eventually like the person who followed Eddie, and Larry is his name. He was good at doing hair. He found himself somewhere to do that—that is, pleating ladies' hair, helping them to look gorgeous. And he makes money. And sometimes he will come home and help with bills and so on, but the most important thing was that he had somewhere to stay. And eventually he moved out, and Dennis followed. And Dennis got his asylum and also moved out.

Those who came for asylum, seeking asylum, we link them with organizations. Heartland Alliance was the first one I knew. And we were doing that. They go to Heartland, and I understand Heartland will help them with all they need to do, while I'll help them with their stories. We

sit down and write their story. Well, English is our second language, so even though Nigeria, the lingua franca in Nigeria is English, we still sit down to really help each other edit our papers.

And I got papers not only from Chicago, because we were at the same time building a new community. Not Courage, but a new African Nigerian community started growing in New York. And some of them who knew about me would send their stories for editing, and I will read through and edit and suggest arrangement and rearrangement, put years, make sure you have concrete evidence, all those things. I was able to do that.

So when Dennis came, by the time Dennis came I had already made up my mind I was going to start... I put all the plans in place for Center for Integration and Courageous Living, and that was ready to kick off. So when Dennis came, we worked together on that. I got it registered to some level, and I have not finished the registration. This is the third year now. And I hope this year I will finish the registration.

It was in that process some people came and invited Dennis to a conference in D.C., so he went into that conference. And it was like by the time he came back, CLASP came up, and I said okay, this is...is this a clash or a duplication of duty. And then it was clarified. Because, well, they were going to start CLASP. I actually joined LGBT-FAN. LGBT-

FAN is a kind of coalition of different organizations working with asylum seekers.

Mark B. And you might say what CLASP is for the recording.

John A. CLASP is Chicago LGBT Asylum Support Program. And the Center for Integration and Courageous Living, I simply call it CIC Live, you know, like see, I see, live. And the two of them have been existing side by side since then, and people have been coming into the program. So CLASP became the...because of the connections and everything, because it involved a coalition of churches in Chicago, it became a source of fundraising with which we support activities of CIC Living, and those who are in my house and some others who are outside the house, because my house couldn't contain everybody. We have people who...we have one or two other family who volunteer to house people. And that's how that one has been, and it's going on.

Mark B. Have you seen a change? What's the process like for LGBT folks in Africa getting asylum? Do you think the process is getting any easier or is it becoming easier recognized, or is it still difficult for everybody?

John A. I will say it's eclectic. Sometimes it is, for some people it will just go like that, and they get it. Other times some people have to wait not for three months, six months, but even over a year before they get it. Sometimes will be called for interview. Some people will be called for interview, and will not hear back for a while. It's...the whole asylum program need to be

reviewed so people have justice. Because seeking asylum is also a process of seeking justice.

If the United Nation did not say yeah, you can leave your country and go somewhere else where you are safe, or if America did not say okay, you can come here, we welcome you, I don't believe people will come here. People don't leave Russia to go to Middle East seeking asylum, or leave Africa and go to Saudi Arabia to seek asylum as a gay person. No. But if you open the door, then make it happen.

Mostly, from what I've observed so far, majority of those who come to seek asylum are those people who stick out their neck in their home countries to promote awareness about LGBT community and provide services to LGBT community when it was dangerous. And it do get to a stage where people had to relocate because it was getting too dangerous.

Mark B. Right, that's what it sounds like.

John A. And then they come, and then when they come here, they become so stranded. Even some of the organizations that they worked with while they were in Africa who are here also behave as if they never knew them before. That always get me mad, and I sometimes wish I won lottery, enough money to ignore all those organizations and do something else.

Mark B. Have you been back to Nigeria?

John A. I've been back. I went in 2013 before I started my citizenship. It was...

Mark B. Was it difficult?

John A. No, it wasn't. But it was with a lot of promises, and agreement with my family member you will not come and do any political activism, please don't bring present or these things. All those things were kind of there. I was there for two weeks and I had good time. I had good time. My going back also has to do with the fact that I started dating John Adebayo. We met on Facebook and we dated from 2009, and then it's like, okay, at least even if we're going to... And the two of us had intention of marrying or settling together. And if that will happen, we need to meet. It's another process of immigration.

So my sister turned 70 2013, November. Her birthday was one day before my fiancé's birthday. No, my fiancé's birthday was a day before her own because...whichever one comes first, I know we celebrated my fiancé's birthday, we marked it in a hotel where I proposed to him and did everything before we went for my sister's birthday. I think instead of having her own birthday, we went for my sister's big birthday together. And so that one, and it was like...I was kind of scared, will I be able to come back to U.S. All those things were there. But all the same I went, and quietly, and came back triumphantly, entered here and went back to my house.

And last year I applied for citizenship and in May I became a... 14th of May, I believe, I became a citizen of United States of America. I have my

international passport now. I was going to travel to Nigeria again 23rd of this month, but I have to cancel that because my nephew's marriage, which I planned to attend, was postponed until April. And I won't be able to make it in April because the airline wouldn't refund my money, and they wanted me to bring about \$700 plus 900 I gave them if I want to use the same ticket in April. Why? Anyway, we're still on it. Tomorrow I'll give them a call again to see what we can do about it. And that is where we are currently.

Mark B. Any other dreams, things you're thinking about, you'd like to be doing?

John A. Yeah, yeah. It has always been my dream—it's not always easy. You know, America is a beautiful country. At the same time, the racial thing also can inhibit what a black person can do. Because look at the aspect of even the asylum thing. It baffles me that no one saw Center for Integration and Courageous Living, even while it was out there, and then we had to have a duplicate organization called CLASP.

Well, my current dream is to actually—I'll keep talking with CLASP, but I want to focus primarily on empowerment of persons through possibility of starting a kind of scholarship grant to really, to help, even if it is one person in three years or two in three years, to achieve a professional life, not here in U.S., but in Africa. An LGBT person to attain a professional life. Because I've come to know that with economic independence comes a lot of strength. To be able to stand as one's self as an LGBT person in

Africa. If another one feeding me and I'm not working under you. Because we have a lot of people, young ones who are thrown out of the house, in Nigeria, in Uganda, and other places across Africa for being gay. And when that happens, their educational life stops. So that's my current dream.

So I'm working on having a kind of committee or a board to...forming a board to work on that. And I just have to be courageous about it. I wouldn't want what happened to CIC Living to happen to it because I believe not registering CIC Living for some time and not really believing I will be able to even generate money led to unnecessary duplication. But I also thank God we have the whole duplication because some money came in and some people were helped and—

Mark B. Some people were helped.

John A. Yeah, through it, so... And I'm resolved and I'll be happy to see that CLASP continue to progress, and I'll continue to play my part in seeing to that. But this year my focus, 2015 my focus from this year will be very much on how to raise the necessary fund to promote empowerment of person in Africa, LGBT people in Africa. I know I can't provide school fees for everybody, and I know it may be a difficult process, but I know it is...no matter how, a drop in the ocean makes a difference.

Mark B. Makes a difference, it sure does.

John A. To the volume of water in there. So that's my own goal.

Mark B. Good.

John A. Thank you.

Mark B. Thank you for all this time. You have an amazing, powerful story, John.

John A. Thank you.

Mark B. So you realize...what all you've come through and what you've done, you certainly have...I think you can accomplish whatever you want. So thank you for the time.

John A. Thank you.

[End of recording.]