

Helen Fallon, Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University meets African people living in Ireland. Through sharing stories we can reach a better understanding of each other and our hopes and dreams.

Sharing Our Stories

From Nigeria to Kilcock: Philomena Abulu Obasi tells her family's story...

Early Days

I was born in Ondo State, Western Nigeria. I belong to the Edo ethnic group. My people are traditionally known for their bronze carvings and royalty. We were a family of eleven children. The first seven were boys, so my arrival, as the 8th, was greeted with much joy. My father worked for a British company that made mattresses and other foam products. He had primary certificate which was a good standard of education when he was growing up. He was working in Zaria, Northern Nigeria and went back to his home village in the Mid-West, to find a wife. He married my mother, Modupe, a Yoruba name which means "we thank God". It was an arranged match like in Ireland a century or so ago. He paid a bride price to her family and she relocated to where he resided up north after the traditional marriage rites. She remained with him as wife for 51 years, until his death in 2004. She died five years later, in 2009.

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out of school to work on the farm at a very young age. We attended Primary School in Kano. Although, it was a Catholic school, many of the pupils were Muslim and there was an acceptance of different faiths. On Saturdays, Irish Reverend Sisters from the St Louis order, came to the church in the school compound for catechism classes and to prepare us for the sacraments.

We moved around a bit with my father's job (even during the Biafran War) and in 1978, we returned to the south to Benin-City. I attended St Maria Goretti Girls Grammar School, Benin-City. Reverend Sister Henrietta Power, who died at age 97 years in November 2020, was the Principal of the school from 1962 to 1984. She did so much for us and I remember her with such fondness.

My encounters with Irish missionaries were really positive. In addition to getting a really good education, we saw them visiting the leper colony, bringing food to people who were considered outcasts and working in hospitals. We admired them. In school, they were strict but nice all the same. I attended various universities on my way to a master's degree, later working in the banking and finance, oil and gas, event management sectors.

Ireland

I got married in 2001. Life was very challenging in Nigeria and I lost my job. My marriage didn't work out and it was hard being a single parent in that society. I felt we could have a better life in Ireland and came here with my two children in 2014. The Catholic Church gave my family a lot of support, both in my first parish in Clondalkin and in my current parish in Kilcock, particularly in the early stages when I was out of work. Our Catholic faith has sustained us in difficult times. I'm a Eucharistic Minister and my children are Readers with Saint Coca's Catholic Church. My son Timothy attends a Catholic College in Spain. My daughter, Christeen, is in first year in Trinity College Dublin. When I was at school in Nigeria, Sister Henrietta, often talked about Trinity College. Little did I think in those days that my daughter would study there.

I enjoy being part of the community, through the Catholic Church in Kilcock. Many Nigerians who come to Ireland are Catholic, but change to Pentecostal churches. I think they feel more at home in churches where there are a lot of other African people and also



Left to right: Helen Fallon, Philomena Abulu Obasi and her daughter Christeen. (Photo: P. Abulu Obasi)

these churches tend to have services with a lot of singing and dancing, which makes them appealing to Nigerians, as celebrating our faith is very much part of our culture.

Encountering Nigeria in Ireland

While on placement at Maynooth University Library, as part of a course I was doing, I became aware of the Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Collection. I was a student when Saro-Wiwa and eight others were executed for protesting about Shell's destruction of their homeland, Ogoni, in the Niger Delta. I hadn't known that he had

worked closely with Irish Sr Majella McCarron. Because of my interest and involvement in these areas, I was invited to contribute a chapter, with colleagues, to a book to mark the 25th anniversary of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa. There was also a poetry competition which my daughter, Christeen, and I entered for and we were both delighted when our poems were selected for publication.

I believe that poetry and writing can help us explore complex issues. In my poem "Smell of the Fish," I tried to capture my memories of unpolluted communal living we experienced as a society through resilience, love and sharing. My daughter Christeen's poem, "Know Where", explores a false reality and how reality can be perceived differently by every individual. It explores being satisfied and happy in a different realm created by oneself.

Looking to the Future

I hope to see my children complete their college education and find fulfilling work. I've been involved in some community development projects and would like to continue to facilitate workshops on adjusting to an all embracing diverse environment on acceptability and understanding of the uniqueness of other cultures and ethnicity. A future where we can contribute our best to the unity and positive development to a nation that has invested and cared for us.

I would want the people of Ireland to appreciate themselves the way we appreciate them on the contribution in the education of many nations, especially in Africa. I am a proud product of the Catholic School, both primary and secondary. I would hope we will continue to honour all those missionaries, dead and alive, who travelled so far away from home to educate the world, especially, the Girl Child. ■