

DI MA-AMA SPEAKS: INTERVIEW WITH MRS. AGNES NWANGBO ILLO OKAFOR

by

CHINYERE GRACE OKAFOR

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Chinyere: Mama, tell me about yourself.

Mama: “What do you want to know?”

Chinyere: Tell me anything that you want your children to remember about you.

Mama: I want all my children to remember that I love all of them; I mean all of them, not just those of you who love me back but even the one that does not come to see me.

(I laugh. She laughs). All of you are my hands and legs; the ones that are good are mine and the one that is sick is mine also. *Na mai bodi.*

Chinyere: *(Laughing)* Di Ma-ama!

Mama: *(Laughing)* *Na me.* I thank God everyday for giving you people to us and for giving us our grandchildren and their children. You are good children that are not like the wind that blows at its own will. You follow in the footsteps of your father, Thomas, who is now in heaven. I am very happy that you have continued to take care of me as your father did. You come here to see me; even those who are in London and America come to see me here whenever they can. It makes me very very happy. But let me say something – o. In case I have offended any of you in any way, I ask for forgiveness, but the person has to tell me so that I will know. I still ask for forgiveness and I ask God to forgive me all my sins both



those that I remember and those that I don't remember.

Chinyere: Why are you talking about forgiveness now?

Mama: I want everybody to remember that I have forgiven him. You have to forgive people and also ask for forgiveness. That is peace. I have finished pounding and kept the mortar. *Ana mu agba ka mu data ego?* I'm not looking at anybody's face; just telling truths without fear of anybody. Only God.

Chinyere: Yes Mama. I don't want to know more about your children. I want you to talk about yourself. What will you like us, your extensions, to know about you?

Mama: Okay. I want you to know that I am the daughter of a very great woman and a great man, but my father died when I was young, so we had to go and live with our mother.

Chinyere: What's her name? Tell me about her.

Mama: You don't know the name of your grandmother?

Chinyere: She was dead before I was born. The woman that was my grandmother was not your biological mother.

Mama: That's true. My mother's name is Ogonnie Mgboro. She was a merchant. She had enormous *ngwa abia*. The men that carried her merchandise were many.

Sometimes, they were up to thirty. They would travel to distant places to buy and sell.

Chinyere: Mama, describe her.

Mama: Oh, I'm sorry that you did not know her. She was a very beautiful woman. Your sister, Beatty,



looks like her; very tall, very dark and very smart. She used to stand *piam!* No nonsense! The way she tied her wrappers was special. She would gather the inside one like this (*She gets up and demonstrates how to make wrapper to look like a pleated skirt*). Then she would tie the top one; her buttocks would be emphasized. Then she would follow her carriers. That was how she went on her trading trips.

Chinyere: What did she sell?

Mama: All kinds of things, but she was known for *aku* and *nsi egbe*.

Chinyere: I can understand her selling wrappers, but a woman selling gun powder?

Mama: Yes. She sold gun powder and *jioji* wrappers. She was strong and rich.

Chinyere: But she did not send you to school. She sent your brother, Anthony, who went on to become a medical doctor.

Mama: You don't know what you are talking about. Do you know how far the school was? Arodiogbu was a boy, so my mother could allow him to go to that distant place. She sent me to the nearby school and then to Women's Training School in Onitsha.

Chinyere: How far was the school that your brother went to?

Mama: The school was in Udi. We were living in Umuaga at that time. You pass Udi, pass Amokwe and continue to Umabi and Umuaga. These are big towns. Do you want me to trek for up to ten miles to get to school? They could not even accept my brother at Udi School because he was very small. Only big boys were accepted because of the long journey. My mother took Arodi to the house of the District Officer in Udi. No, it was the house of the priest. She shocked the white man. You know that they were not used to the boldness of our women. Before he knew what my mother was up to, she brought out a lot of money to show him that she was very rich and could pay for my brother to live in his house and go to school.

They put him in the school and changed his name to something that they could pronounce. That was how he became Anthony. He was baptized as Anthony. My mother did not care about the new name. Because of her

travels, she knew that school education was valuable. She was prepared to spend any amount of money to see that we were educated. Umuaga was the center of her trading venture. From there, she would go to Adazi and Onitsha areas. She would come back and then go to interior places. But then I saw your father and wanted to get married.

Chinyere: Tell me the story.

Mama: I told you the story before.

Chinyere: I want to hear it again. Please.

Mama: Alright. We went to watch a football match. Everybody was looking forward to it. I did not know the teams that were playing, but we watched and cheered. I saw your father darting here and darting there and shining like electricity.

(Mama's eyes sparkle as if she is in that field watching my father play soccer. At this point, I begin to laugh. Mama also laughs). Don't you know that your father was a football player? He played center forward. That was why your brothers played for their schools too.



Charlie was the captain of his team when he was in college. Edwin played also. That was what they used their bow legs for. Some of our grand children inherited his legs. Look at Emeka, Monica's child; he has the legs for playing football but because of the family's love for education, he had to become a lawyer like Monica and John Edozie. Your father was very popular. That day, his team won the match. The members carried him on their shoulders and ran around the field. The crowd cheered. We stood at a distance and watched. You could not mistake him on top of their shoulders because of his electric color. Everybody talked about him. He was very good looking, very intelligent and had already become a teacher even as he still studied.

Then, one day, as I was playing with my friends, I saw him in the company of some people. I could not mistake him.

“That’s the footballer,” one of the girls said.

“Teacher!” They ran towards him. I ran back. They were going to our house, so I took a short cut to our house.

I said to my mother, “Mama, some people are coming to our house with that footballer!”

My mother went to the door to find out. By then, they were almost at our door because I heard her greet them. I ran inside. I was excited. From inside, I peeped to see them. Then Mama came inside unexpectedly. She caught me peeping and began to laugh (*She laughs*). She put kola nuts¹ in the *okwa* and told me to take it to the visitors. I almost dropped the *okwa* because I trembled, but as soon as I opened the door, I became strong. I did not stumble or anything. I just greeted them and ran back to the room. I was shy.

After they left, Mama told me that the men were your father’s uncles, and the woman with them was a trader that used to buy things from her. She was their guide to her house. They wanted to know whether my mother would like your father to marry me.

Yes, yes, yes, yes! I said “yes” many times. My mother laughed. Then she said that she would think about it. I think that she spoke to people who liked money too much. She told me that your father was in a profession that did not make money. She preferred another man who was employed by the Railways, but I did not like the man.

“People who work in Loco make a lot of money. I want somebody who can take care of you and the children that Chineke will give you,” my mother said.

“Mama please, I want the football player.”

My mother later changed her mind. “At least he has education and this is what will rule the world in the future,” she said. I was sent to a training school in Onitsha. The owner of the school was Mrs. Madubuuko. She was the mother of Philomena, Barrister Byron Onyeama’s wife. That woman and the teachers taught me how to be the wife of an educated man. Even though I learnt how to tie fanciful *jioji* from my mother, and use *uli* and *ufie* to make up at festivals, I did not know about lipsticks and high heeled shoes. It was in Onitsha that I learnt how to use lipsticks, stretch my hair with hot

comb to make it in the style of educated people. We learnt how to sew clothes, make table cloths, knit, crochet, bake, and how to make all kinds of things that were needed in the house. I used to make handkerchiefs for your father. I used to sew heart and flower shapes in the handkerchiefs. Then we began to talk about the wedding.

Chinyere: Was it in that school that you learnt how to tie and dye?

Mama: No. I learnt it later when your father was teaching in Egede or maybe Ukana. Do you remember Ukana? On your way to Nsukka, you pass Ngwo, Abor, then you get to Ukana. You continue, and then you’ll see the road that leads to Egede. Egede is the hometown of Reverend Father Innocent Egbujie, our good son. We were living in his hometown when I had my wrapper died for the first time.

I had a friend, Mrs. Adinde, who was living in Enugu at that time. She was from Owa. She named her daughter after mine so she was Mama Monica just as I am Mama Monica. Mama Monica Adinde knew the latest fashion in the city. We used to buy wrappers together and we would sew them. One day, I did not like the color of the wrapper, but I bought it because of its popular name. She told me that we could redesign it. We went to one Yoruba woman who did wonders to it. My wrapper became different. One in town!

Chinyere: Di Ma-ama!

Mama: *Ai no dey hear* that time – o. I continued to dye my clothes even after we left Egede. After church, women would come to me to ask me where I bought my blouse or wrapper. Many of my friends wanted to redesign their wrappers and even blouses. All these gave me the idea. I went to Enugu and learnt how to dye cloth. Women would buy wrappers and want me to redesign it so that it would be unique.

My house was the center of fashion at that time because of my eye for dressing and also because of my sewing school and the girls that I trained. There was one woman that inspired me in Eke at that time. She was a fashionable woman called Mrs. Ifudu. She and her husband would sometimes dress to-match; blouse and shirt of the same color and sometimes helmets of the same color. Your father used to wear helmets too. He used to look good in white shorts, white shirt, and white

helmet. Sometimes he wore suit. Sometimes he wore *chelu-ka-m-kwuo*. He looked good in everything. People used to line up to watch us when we walked up to our seats in the front.



Chinyere: Mama, you refer to Eke more than any other place.

Mama: We lived in Eke for over twenty years. We went back and forth. We always returned to Eke. It used to be the headquarters in those days. We knew The Blessed Tansi when he was a seminarian. At that time, your father said that Tansi was exceptional and that he would like to know “what the man would be in the future.” I’m happy that your father was alive when the miracles that were leading to his beautification began to happen. We even witnessed the one at Ugbene where Tansi also served.

We lived in many other places. We lived in Oghe, Eke, Abor, Ukana, Egede, Isigwu Umana, Akpakwume Nze, and so on. I remember all of them. We still have friends in those places. Some of the places were rural at that time in the forties and fifties. But they were good places without crime or maybe very little. In Isigwu Umana at that time, they would perform *aja-mme* on criminals, so people did not commit crimes. For example, if someone stole something, they would pour dirt on him, and make him go round the villages of the



town while the crowd sang and mocked him. It was such a big shame that the person usually ran away from the town; maybe to the city where nobody knew his background. They don’t do such things these days because the modern police have taken over, but they can’t cope with the job. Look at all the armed robberies that go on these days. Some robbers even have better guns than the police.

Anyway, let me continue with the story. Isigwu Umana was not developed at that time but people were good and there was love. You had to trek for about two miles before you got to the spring called Umio. It was a tiny spring, but it was like a social center. People were always there, washing clothes, waiting for their clothes to get dry, waiting for their containers to fill up, eating and sharing snacks, telling stories, and laughing. We lived in the Mission that consisted of the school made up of two huge buildings; one for the junior and one for the senior classes. There were offices for the headmaster and a staff room. There were lots of flowers in the school compound. Your father was the headmaster. There was also our house and an apartment building for the teachers. We had a lantana hedge in front of our house. A long yard separated our house from the teachers’ quarters. Some of them would always walk across to our house on Sundays after mass. We would talk and eat. When your father bought gramophone, the villagers would come too and he would play music for everybody. Some would dance. Those days were good, but there was a big problem. We did not have enough money. Our income was not growing, but the family was growing. My mother had told me a long time ago that money would be a big problem. That was why I made sure that I always struggled to make extra money.

Chinyere: Tell me how you did it.

Mama (*inhales deeply, shakes her head and begins to talk*): Where will I begin? What didn’t I do? As the children came, it dawned on me that we needed a lot of money as my mother had predicted. I also knew that the money would not come from one source only; the teaching profession. Teaching gave us respect; but my mother said that “you cannot eat respect,” and she was right. I began in a very small way. I started by having a training school where I taught girls the things that I learnt from my school in the city of Onitsha. People ordered things like bed sheets and pillow cases from us. We also made other

things for sale. I used to make a lot from the sale of handkerchiefs. We made dresses for girls and blouses for women. We also made school uniforms. That was how I started.

More girls came to my school. Sometimes they were up to five or ten or more than that. As they graduated, more came so there were always many of them. Not all of them liked to sew. Some of them preferred to trade, so I took them with me to my stall in the market. I was what they called a petty trader then. I sold soap, creams, and things like that. I also sold provisions, but fish was the thing that people bought more than other things, so I had a stall for fish and it brought in a lot of money. Sometimes I went to Enugu to buy the things. Most of the time, I went to my brother Sylvanus in Uzo Nkwagu, Amokwe. We would travel to Onitsha to buy bags of stockfish and *mangala*, cartons of tinned milk and all kinds of soap for bathing and for washing clothes. Silver had a big store in Amokwe. From Amokwe, I would return home. My market stalls were always busy. I also had a shop in our compound. I sold soft drinks, bread, biscuits, milk, sweets and other provisions. The place was always busy even when the girls had closed for the day. You know our people; some of them would come at night and beg me to sell something to them.



Chinyere: It is amazing that my father supported you in all these.

I remember how he used to take care of me and IK when you were away. He used to take us to his school and spread a mat on the floor for us to play. That was how we learnt all the poems that they recited at school even before we started going to

school. My father was very nice. How many men take care of children while their wives leave the house ... (*Mama interrupts me*).

Mama: Why won't he take care of his children? Do you think that it was easy for me? It was struggle. He struggled and got promotion in his job. Me? I did not fold my hands. Which woman would not like to stay in

the house and have a man bring money to her to take care of the house? But I had to do what I had to do because of the size of the family. Where would your father have got the money to train all of you including the ones that we adopted? And don't blame us for adopting them, especially because some of them forget us after they have made it. The reason for adopting is to help. That is what God wants us to do. God wants us to use what we have to help God's children in any way that we can. When I came into your father's house, he presented me with a son.

Chinyere: What?

Mama: Don't you know Michael? Michael Eneja?

Chinyere: Okay. You are referring to the bishop.

Mama: Don't you know that he is our first son. You father had brought him in before I came, so I just followed the pattern. We did not have money, but we still managed to send him to college. He wanted to be a priest and we also supported that. He became a very good priest. God blessed him and blessed us with him.

Chinyere: But he doesn't do anything for us, Mama. He did not pay school fees for any of us and he has not ..."

Mama: He is doing God's work. He is doing a lot for us and for the whole world. He prays for us. He comes here to see me. He comes to every important family function. Your father goes to consult with him before we decide on matters of the family. Do you remember when your uncle, Celicious and his ship were seized near Burutu during the Nigeria-Biafra war? That was after my child, Edwin, was stolen by death in the war. Your father's brothers said that we could not endure another mishap. I remember how they made suggestions. Do you remember Pius Okoro, the father of Grace, Edwin and Kevin? There were Nwakanmma and Osegwo who were farmers in Ugbo Nike and Ugbo Odogwu. Raphael and John Aghabanti were in Arochukwu. Basil was living in Enugu. Gregory, the father of Vicky and Martina had his own ideas. Frederick looks exactly like your father. People used to mistake him and your father. Mathias; the father of Richard, Virgie, Fed, Cletus, Adeline and another young one ...

Chinyere: His name is Uchenna. Remember that you are telling me your story.

Mama: I cannot talk about myself without talking about Thomas, my husband, and I am part of Okafor family, so his brothers and sisters must come into this talk. I have mentioned your sibling, Edwin, and the Nigeria-Biafra war. We had never seen a thing like that in our lives. When they fought the Second World War, we heard stories from those who returned from overseas. Your father's cousin, Pius Okoro, fought in the Second World War. He was in the British army. He told us about the battles, but the Nigeria-Biafra war was in our midst. We saw it. Edwin died early in the war. Your father's sister, Ikodinya, the mother of Goddy and Uloko, came with suggestions for the family. Your uncles and aunts were right to worry about the extended family. Bishop Eneja came with a plan for fasting and praying throughout the war.

When Eke was threatened, we decided to run to the interior of Biafra. Your father could not run without going to collect his sister and her family. I also could not run without collecting my brother, Sylvanus, and his family. My brother Anthony was still in Germany then. We loaded a few things in the car and a lorry. We traveled to Owa first to get some of our people. We had a home there, you know. That was where your father's father, Okoroafo Enendu, settled. The rest of your father's relations through his father, Okorafor the son of Enendu, son of Orji, son of Esomonu, and the rest were in Arochukwu and the place was safe at that time. So those in Owa were our main concern because Owa was threatened, but Ikodie, Mama Edwin, refused to come with us.



Chinyere: Can you tell me why they called her Mama Edwin even though you are the biological mother of my brother, Edwin?

Mama: Ikodie was Oti's wife. Oti was your father's brother. When he died, Ikodie was young and could have gone back to her parent's house,

but she stayed with your grandmother, Udeaku Ugo. On top of it, she did not have a child. I kept having children and had many. She was always unhappy. When we came home during the holidays, she would say that I did this or that. At one time she said that I bought many wrappers for myself and brought a few for her. Another time, she said that this child or that one insulted her. When the

troubles were too many, your father's sisters came to settle the matter. We had a family meeting. They said that she was unhappy because she had no child. In front of everybody, I told her to choose one of my children and she chose Edwin. That was how she became Mama Edwin. Edwin was her child. When he died, she could not be consoled and she never recovered from her agony. When we went to collect her during the war, she refused to leave the house. She was still wearing black clothes for mourning Edwin and did not want to leave the compound with memories of him.

You did not waste time during the war. One second could be the difference between your life and death. When your father saw that she was adamant about not leaving, he said that we had to leave without her. We hugged each other and wouldn't let go. We wept because of the loss of our son, Edwin. We wept because of the unknown thing that had descended on us and made us to run away from our homes. Your father called me in a stern voice. I was very sad to leave her. I didn't know whether we would survive the war.



We then went to Amokwe to get your aunt, Ikodinya, and her children, Goddy, Uloko and others. Goddy enlisted in the army. We also got my brother, Sylvanus, his wife Lucy, and their children. My sister, Teresa Nwangbo was safe in Aba with her husband and children. We all fasted and prayed throughout the war. I searched for my son, Augustine Esom, throughout the war because he had traveled to see his uncle and Okeke Nze in Umana. He did not run with us from Eke.



Whenever new refugees flocked into Biafra from Nigeria, your father would go asking about him. Many of our people died in that war. There was a day that

we lost seven members of the family in an air raid. They went to bury someone who had died, and then an enemy plane bombed the place. That was how seven left at a time. Many people died in the war. Many survived. Celicius survived. Ikodie and Augustine Esom that did not run with us survived the war. We thank God.



You see, I'm not saying that the bishop saved our family, but his spiritual guidance was good. Your father's leadership was good. He would

listen to everybody. The thing was that he always agreed with the bishop's view. After all, he trained him. When Mathias was ill, your father went to him also. Mathias was your father's brother from the same mother, Udeaku Ugomma. Do you remember their mother, your grandmother? Ezenwanyi Udeaku Ugomma was very beautiful. She would wake up in the early hours of the morning; have her bath even before we woke up. At her age, she would still line her eyes with *otanjele*, and use *edo* around her eyes. She would dress up, tie her scarf and sit at the entrance of her house in the morning when we went to greet her.



(*Mama laughs*) Do you know how she became a Christian? She said that since her children and grand children were Christians, she had to follow them to their new religion. She chose the name Monica because of her love for my daughter, Monica. I want you people to know that the bishop contributes to this family in ways that you do not see, but in ways that are very important and effective. The Bishop prays for us. He comes to say mass at important family ceremonies. He was there when



we celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary. He was there for my baby, Patrick; when God took him. He was there for Edwin. He was there for Monica. He was there for your father. What else do you want from a man of God? Nothing more.

Chinyere: Thank you, Mama, for narrating this background. I want you to explain something that came out from what you said earlier. You said that you brought a lot of money into the family. Papa paid all my school fees and

Mama: Look at me. Don't put words into my mouth. Did I say that I made all the money? Your father was very strict with money. You know that. He saved a lot of money, but that was because I accepted any amount that he gave me for house keeping. I used my own money to make it up. He bought land in the city, houses and taxis. He was always thinking about the future and children's education. His children are my children so it suited me very well.

Chinyere: And you lived happily ever after.

Mama: There were problems, but we kept them to ourselves. It was not easy to get money from your father. He would even keep it in the bank and tell me the future plan he had for the money. Many times, I bought my clothes, bought for you people, and also bought for your father. Every woman must make her own money. All the girls that came to me for training; the first thing I told them was that they must learn how to be on their own. Don't ever depend on another person no matter who he is. Supposing a man says that he will not provide for you, are you going to die? If you show that you are a human being, he will respect you.

Chinyere: And he won't beat you ..."

Mama: No -o. He can. Don't take men for granted. Your father gave me a dirty slap one day and I saw stars. Yes, he did. *Nekwe mu na agba vuru-nya vuru-nya, gbafu iwhu di nya*. I was making *inyanga* that I had a perfect marriage. My friends envied me. Then your father showed me that he could reduce me. I

realized why my mother warned me. She said that a woman should not wear the cap of husband on the forehead; you wear it on the side, so that if it falls off, nobody will notice it. Just a few years into the marriage, my eyes opened. He started to beg me to forgive him. He said that it was a mistake and so on.



He told me not to tell my mother. He was afraid of my mother. For sure, my mother would not have let him get away with it.

Chinyere: What could she have done?

Mama: My mother? Ogbonnie Ngboro. My mother was known as Agaba Nwanyi. You know the meaning of *agaba*? Ever-ready for war! Ready to deal with any problem! My mother did not find trouble—o, but she was ready to deal with it when it came to her. She could have made a lot of trouble for your father and he would have been in a hot soup. Your father would not have liked the manager of schools to hear about it. My mother could have ended the marriage, at least for some time until he convinced us that he would not do it again. You know that tradition would have required him to remarry me. That was what they did then, but these days; these young women will not tell anybody when their husbands misbehave. The custom of remarriage is good-o! Your father would have spent a lot of money on ceremonies and appeasement, and he did not have the money.

My brother, Sylvanus, could have retaliated. He was a musician at that time and had all these tough friends that your father said were not good for him. Sylva was a hot head at that time and could have shown your father pepper. My mother could have slapped him too-o (*I laugh*). Don't laugh. It's true. They said that my mother had single bone, because she could beat up anybody. I could too, but when your father slapped me, I was in a difficult part of the month. Anyway, to tell the truth, you can't compare a woman's hand and a man's hand (*she laughs*).

It happened during recess; he came to the house. When he went back to school, I just packed a few things for me and the baby. I put the baby on my back, tied him properly and took off in my bicycle. Women's bicycles in those days did not run as fast as men's bicycles but it was fast all the same. I wanted to use it to get back to my mother's house. That would have been a long distance. We were living in Eke and my mother was in Amokwe. Of course you know Amokwe, where my brother Sylvanus settled and where his wife, Lucy, still lives. It is up to twenty miles from Eke.



Your father might have been watching or maybe some students might have seen me. He made a plan with two other men. They took another route in their bicycles. They were faster than me. I was in Ngwo, almost at the Ninth-mile corner when I saw two men coming from the opposite direction.

“That’s Mama Monica.” Onyia said.

“Mama Charlie, where are you going to?” Becket said.

“See how you are sweating. Your baby’s neck is not well positioned.”

“Let me help you.”

(Mama mimics the voices of the speakers. There is mockery in her voice).

I was happy that they wanted to help. I untied the wrapper that was holding my baby. Onyia took the baby. I was busy arranging the wrapper for retying the baby when they took off with my baby. They were speeding. I bit my lips. *Agu ata-a mu ncha n'isi!* I was full on regrets. I blamed myself for not knowing their trick. I had no choice but to follow them. By the time I got home, they were there with the baby, your father, and my best friend, Christiana. He begged me. Christiana begged me. He said that it was a mistake and promised that it would not happen again. Everybody told me to give him another chance. He made me promise not to tell my mother about it.

Chinyere: You never told us all these years that Papa slapped you. And he used to preach in the church and counsel couples.

Mama: Yes and he was a very good preacher and a very good husband. We used to counsel couples together. We used our experience to talk about mistakes, repentance, forgiveness, togetherness and commitment to marriage. That someone made a mistake once is not a good reason to condemn that person forever. Your father developed his own way of avoiding my tongue. We women use our mouths as weapons. God gave us mouths *di egwu*. God gave every living thing its own good defense weapon. If not, others will trample on them.