

Regional

Scholar introduces SIUE students to Yoruba

One thing that colleges and universities do routinely in order to improve the education experiences of their students is to host foreign scholars. These educators come to campus to provide American students specialized courses, along with different and sometimes challenging world perspectives. Ololade Afolabi, a native of Nigeria, is currently a Fulbright Scholar in the department of foreign languages and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She came to teach Yoruba, a language little known in the United States.

"Yoruba is my native language," said Afolabi. "It is the language I was brought up with. It is something I have spoken since I was very little, so, in fact, it is not that difficult for me to teach. I see what I do here as a venue to teach people that Yoruba goes beyond the coast of West Africa. So I am happy to teach it in the United States." In fact, it is spoken by more than 20 million people in the African countries of Nigeria, Benin and Togo, as well as in other parts of Africa, Europe and the Americas. Many communities of African descent in the Caribbean speak a variation of Yoruba.

Afolabi obtained a bachelor's degree in English from Adekunle Ajasin University and a master's degree in English literature from the University of Ibadan, both in Nigeria. Interestingly enough, Yoruba is not the language she learned in school or used in everyday life in Nigeria.

"The language of communications in Nigeria is the English language because English is the official national language," she explained. "That is the language we use in school, mass media, government, politics and in many other areas. This is done because of the diverse ethnic groups. In order for all ethnic groups to be able to enjoy the best of the government policies we use



Courtesy of Ololade Afolabi

Professor Ololade Afolabi in her home in Nigeria.

the English language." She added that there are newspapers, television and radio programs that are published or broadcast in Yoruba, but that they are only prominent in the southwestern part of the country.

This situation is not unusual in Africa, where the European colonizing powers set up countries and borders with no regard for the ethnic composition of their peoples. Because of colonization, many of these countries today have either English or French as their official language. The reason behind languages like Yoruba being spoken in parts of the Caribbean and South America has its roots in the slave trade. In fact, those influences are not only in languages but also in other aspects of the culture.

"Before I came to SIUE I was at Notre Dame for the Fulbright orientation and I met a lady from Brazil who asked me if I knew something called Yemoja," Afolabi said. And I said, 'Yes, very well.' Yemoja is the name of a goddess in Yoruba cosmology. And she told me they have Yemoja in Brazil. Then I told her that there are many Yoruba speakers in Brazil due to the slave trade. Even in Caribbean music you can see traces of Yoruba."

There are other interesting aspects about the Yoruba people, such as the high rate of twins in their populations, a phenomenon that has been attributed by some to the food that they eat. "In Yoruba culture we call twins *ibeji*," Afolabi said. "Ibeji means a birth that comes by two. Any family where twins have been born is regarded as sacred and most often people revere them. It could be one set in a family, or some families may not even have it for three or four generations. But any family that has twins is always regarded as a revered family. So twins are a very sacred thing in Yoruba cosmology. And they believe that their destinies are tied together. If you offend one, it affects the

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

other, and the other may decide to fight for the one you offended."

The reasons why Afolabi became a teacher have family roots. "I was brought up by a father and mother who are teachers, and I found that teaching spirit in them," she said. "My mother is a Yoruba teacher. So she teaches Yoruba very well. And I love teaching because it gives me a very good platform to be able to impart youngsters with knowledge and to know how to relate better with them because I believe the school environment is the best place to meet youth." She has, however, found the approach to teaching in this country quite different from her native one.

"The visual aspect of teaching here is much more pronounced with the use of the projector and visual graphics," she said. "The students will be able to comprehend faster what they are learning. We also have that in Nigeria, but it is not as prominent as it is in the United States." When asked when would be the best time of the year to visit Nigeria, she answered enthusiastically.

"Nigeria is good at all seasons," she said. "Something I discovered about Americans since I have been here is that they love summer more than the winter. So in Nigeria we don't have snow, and we don't have the harsh weather. I can visit Nigeria at any time of the year and also I believe that any part of the country is good to stay in."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.