

Chat with

Charles Ndi Chia, Senior Journalist

(Hands that transitioned from woodwork to great penmanship)



Interviewer:

Let me begin by thanking you for the time you have allocated to conduct this interview for the OOSA North America Inaugural Convention. You have risen to the pinnacle of journalism in Cameroon but some people do not know that you morphed from a trained carpenter in Ombe College to your present profession. Please share your person to our readers.

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

I was born at 12 noon, on Wednesday July 4, 1956. A Staunch Catholic Christian, baptized on July 9, 1956. Upon completing primary education, I had a burning ambition of being ordained into the priesthood, someday. But that dream was scuttled when I was denied admission into Bishop Rogan College in 1968 because I was a bed wetter. Got admitted to GTC Ombe in 1971 in the Woodwork department and specialized in Carpentry and Joinery.

Interviewer:

Are you therefore implying that getting admission to GTC was like a walk in the park?

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

Absolutely, not. Nothing could be further from the truth. I must emphasize that in our days, only those applicants who performed best at the Common Entrance examination were admitted to Ombe. It wasn't a dumping ground for mediocre as many believe. I got admitted to Ombe because of my sterling performance at the government Common Entrance. On account of this fact,

I was qualified to take the interview into this prestigious institution. Otherwise, I was destined for Sasse, Sacred Heart and Saint Bede's College that had all given me admission.

Interviewer:

What was your experience in Ombe as a student?

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

The first impression I got upon stepping into the GTC Ombe campus was that this was paradise on earth. Our parents had paid a deposit of FCFA15,000 out of which we were provided decent accommodation and feeding; part of our school uniforms, healthcare and other needs. We had a functional library, laboratories and well-equipped workshops and highly trained instructors. Mind you, the FCFA 15,000 was one off. That is, until we graduated, not a franc more was demanded from any student.

For one month we were made to carry out what was referred to as orientation, after which we were each asked to choose what trade to learn. Majority of us opted to be at the Electrical workshop. The school authorities stepped in and used their discretionary powers to shove some of us to the Woodwork department. That is how I became a carpenter. It wasn't funny because carpentry wasn't particularly "romantic" plus, we of that workshop were mocked and derided both in and out of Ombe. So, you see, becoming a carpenter was inadvertent. That wasn't what I bargained for. So, after graduating in 1975, I started thinking of a switch to journalism. By the way, I was already cutting my teeth as a reporter even before I wrote and passed the GCE.

Interviewer:

Almost every past student remembers a teacher or two who left footprints on their mind. I am sure you had such experiences. Would you mind sharing?

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

Oh dear! Ombe teachers during our time were an epitome of discipline. My being a stickler for discipline today is partly a manifestation of the orderliness that was imparted in us in Ombe. The teachers, all of them were strict without being inhumane. They lived those values, and practiced what they taught us. Orderliness and discipline were preached and enforced. Small wonder, the big industries were always hovering around Ombe, at year's end, practically begging to employ the college's graduates. The Ombe of today is a far cry from what it was in the days of yore, for reasons I wouldn't

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Ndi Chia Cont'd

want to bore you with. The teachers were devoted to their jobs in ways that could be considered a calling. They were knowledgeable in their craft, gave all they knew and more. Mr. John Motumba, my carpentry instructor, was not just a very good man and teacher; he was, and remained a father to me even after Ombe and till he died two years ago. Mr. Michael Wacka was an incredibly good teacher and principled individual. He believed in justice and equity for all. Mr. Ndakwa too was very fatherly. He was understanding even to a fault. I also have fond memories of M.I. Morika and Tebid. Of course, I can't name every name here. Fact is...they were jolly good fellows...

Interviewer:

You speak of Ombe with great nostalgia and I can hear a good slice of disappointment with respect to what is being dispensed to the students today. Upon graduation how and where did you make use of your trained craftsman/carpentry hands?

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

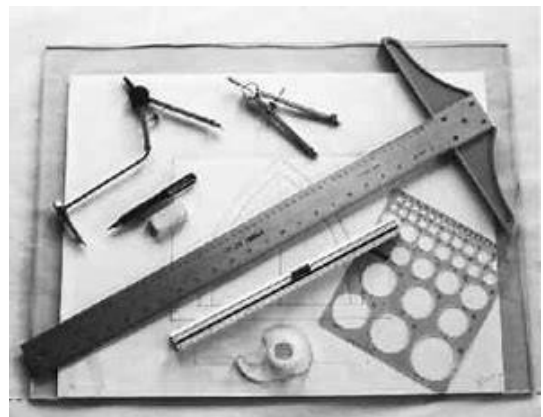
I was employed in the Artisan Workshop of Plantations Pamol du Cameroun where I built several houses, wooden bridges and coffins as well as carried out repair works on sailing boats. Less than two years after being hired by Pamol, I was fired on grounds of insubordination. Cameroon Times employed me as a cub reporter, but within one year I rose from the ranks to become Sub Editor.

Interviewer:

Interesting! How did you pivot to journalism and please discuss some of your achievements?

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

I read journalism in Lagos, Nigeria and worked briefly at that country's main television station (NTA) before returning to Cameroon to edit Cameroon Outlook for about one and a half years. I returned to Cameroon Times as Managing Editor in 1984. Served as correspondent for the London based New African and African Business news magazines for 10 years during which time, I was placed in the top 10 of African journalists. I Joined Cameroon Television (CRTV) at inception and rose to the rank of Deputy Service Chief in charge of Information. Left CRTV in 1992 and went into self-exile. Took over the running of Cameroon Post in 1995. I was founding member



and shareholder of The Post newspaper at inception in 1997. I was one of 50 journalists of the world invited by the US State Department to cover the 2008 Presidential campaigns and elections that ushered in Obama to the White House. Of course, I was the first ever English-speaking Cameroonian to become President of the mother umbrella union of Journalists. But I remain modest, humble and unassuming, no matter what anyone may want to think. It may also interest you and your readers to know that I'm arguably the most detained journalist in Cameroon's media history, having been detained more than 15 times.

Interviewer:

Given your extensive and stela career in journalism, it is natural that you have been inundated with awards and recognitions. Please raise the veil on that.

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

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Modesty aside, my recognition as a journalist of worth goes beyond the frontiers of Cameroon. I have done my best in several other countries where I have practiced or trained young reporters from other climes. It is inherent in the number of world personalities, including heads of state that I either directly interviewed or wrote about; the hundreds of journalism students whom I have mentored in and out of Cameroon over the years and the string of awards that I have been given, including being named in the Top Five Political Analysts of the Decade (1990-2000).

Recently, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication of the University of Buea recognized and honored me as a promoter of journalism (Field training) going by the fact that hundreds of their students passed through my hands. Some of them are professors of Mass Communication and Journalism, in and out of Cameroon. Others are manning big media and other related enterprises all over. My practice meanwhile, has not been limited to the print media. Far from that, as I have also worked in radio, television and publish relations.

Interviewer:

Let us return to technical education in Cameroon and ask you to give us your perspective on this topic.

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

Please do not get me started on this issue. Technical education in Cameroon today when assessed from the perspective of the quality of its training facilities is pathetic, short and simple.

It is even worse, when cognizance is taken of the obsolete training tools in an iconic institution like Ombe.

Truth be told, very serious and urgent action ought to be taken to bring back Ombe from the doldrums. The sweet pep talks and promises day in day out won't do our nation any good, technologically speaking.

Prioritization must come into play; honest action must replace chicanery if Ombe must rise again like the proverbial phoenix from its ashes. Let me stop here.

Interviewer:

Final question: OOSA Global/North America is still in its infancy. Do you have any advice as to what direction you would like it take?

Senior Journalist Charlie Ndi Chia

In answer to this particular question, kindly permit me to indicate that it is possible for one to have sight and no vision. But in the present circumstance of OOSA Global/North America, its young leaders have both. The water supply for the kids back in our dear alma-mater is a pointer to this fact. And whatever the daunting odds, keep the focus and sustain the drive and purpose. For now, your assignment is one of toil, not toys...you must endure the burden of leadership wherein, not everyone else agrees with you.

Hasten to make peace especially with those of your elders who are yet to buy into the OOSA Global project, nay nascent leadership no matter how daunting the task of making peace turns out.

Above all, note that over centralized authority is weak, and often illegitimate and based on the perpetration of power, not a sharing of power.

