

...a talk with Chief Mbi Oruh Michael



Interviewer

I will like to begin by thanking you for accepting to sit down for this talk. I understand that you are a traditional chief. Please tell our readers about it.

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

Yes, and thank you for having me. I am the chief of Nkpot village in Eyumujock subdivision, Manyu division in the South West Region of Cameroon. My village comprises 7 families and chieftaincy is rotatory in my village. When the former chief passed, it was my family's turn to provide a chief and I was in pole position and adequately prepared. I love my village and once I became chief, I had great ambitions to bring meaningful development to the village but carrying out any project, even visiting the village, has not been possible due to the arm conflict that has been going on in the Anglophone part of the

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country for the last five or so years. I really lament the situation and hope that it will soon come to pass.

Interviewer

Please tell us your orientation to technical education and particularly, Ombe college.

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

My father was an engineer and a devoted Catholic Christian. With that bias, he saw in me only two possibilities; either to become a priest or an engineer like himself, so he began to orient me in those directions. Upon completing primary education, I had strong inclination to become an engineer rather than a priest. When I told him about it, he did not stand in my way. Ombe college at that time was like a polytechnic of today. The standards and reputation of the college were quite high. Therefore, in my mind, Ombe college was a clear path towards that goal, especially because I was and still a person who is very tactile, loves to touch and feel things. I wrote and passed the entrance examination and enrolled at the college in 1970. Fitter Machinist was my area of specialty.

Interviewer

This must have been very exciting to you. Please with our readers some of your experiences at the college.

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

Where do I begin? I had great experiences in Ombe. The college laid a solid foundation for me. It instilled in me the sense of discipline and hard work, cultures that have guided and carried me throughout my professional life. The principal workshop instructor during my time was Mr. Effiom, of blessed memories. This guy was not just a disciplinarian of the first order, he was a perfectionist and he demanded not an iota short of those qualities from his students. We nicknamed him "Ngum", meaning someone who was powerful. The man could literally carry the engine of a car seemingly without effort or breaking a sweat. His tolerance for mediocrity was very thin. He was not a man associated with fooling around with students who did not take their work seriously. He was not reluctant to engage his student even in a fist

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fight if they did not conform and that was the only measure to correct them. In fact, he did that in several instances. His approach placed every student on alert. While it may have appeared overbearing at the time, in the long run, that discipline paid off.

Interviewer: What happened upon graduation?

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

I graduated in 1974. In those days, ombe was fertile grounds for company recruitment. Students were recruited out of the gate. I was recruited to work for Pamol, the oil producing company. I worked with them for 4 years, then went to Lagos, Nigeria, to work for an asbestos/cement factory, that offered better pay and greater opportunities.

Interviewer

Hmm! It looks like at the point you began following the money. What happened to the young would-be engineer's mind set?

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

Oh, oh. Not at all! Those served as stepping stones for me. Because, from Nigeria I traveled to the United States, specifically to Tuskegee University in Alabama. After a couple of years there, I transferred to the university of Arlington in Texas, where I obtained a degree in Industrial engineering. I was not satisfied with that level of education, so I went on to the University of Texas, Houston, and obtained a Masters in Business Administration. Similar to when I graduated from Ombe, I also got hired upon graduation and worked for a company called Optical Electronics, based in Dallas, from 1982 to 86. It was a great company to work for and I enjoyed my time there but after 4 years, I decided to return to Cameroon.

Interviewer

Interesting and somehow surprising that you made the decision to return to Cameroon just after 4 years of work...leaving the U.S, which several people consider the land of "milk and honey". Was it a difficult decision and what was the motivation?

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

Although I understood the dilemma, honestly, it was not a difficult one. I would not say I never liked America, rather, I would say I am very patriotic about my country, Cameroon. I thought that after acquiring the first-class education, training and knowledge, it was simply

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appropriate to come back and serve my people. It was also a coincidence that the Cameroon government had just advertised the recruitment of 1500 degree holders. I was immediately absorbed in the public service as “cadre”.

Interviewer

Like anywhere else, working in Cameroon posed some challenges. How were you able to navigate some of the challenges you faced especially in light that your study was abroad and in English?

Chief Mbi Oruh Michael

Well challenges are everywhere as you clearly stated. I face some in the United States, as well. But at the end of the day, you have to adjust, especially psychologically to the environment and the prevailing circumstances in which you find yourself. If I could do so in a strange land like the U.S, I was able to do the same with less effort in my country. I rose up the ranks from chief of Service at the central administration to Provincial chief, provincial delegate, Director at the ministry of industry, technical advisor # 2 and the #1.

Then I ventured out of the ministry to work for the United Nations as a national consultant. It was there that, working on a palm oil project, I was able to attract a monetary award of 2 billion frs. cfa for Cameroon and Nigeria under the title, “Common Funds for Commodity”. Under that project, 4 oil mill sites each were established in Cameroon and Nigeria. It was both a privilege and pride for me to have helped in realizing the projects.

Interviewer

Chief, what would be your parting words to students at the college and generally, to students in technical colleges?

This is a good question. Often times there is the believe that technical education is inferior to grammar education. I stand to say that this is not true and you can quote me anywhere anytime. First, people who think that way, fail to understand the complexity of society. I will tell the students to be proud of what they do and especially be thrive to be best at what they do. We all thrive to be successful in life and contribute to a better world. And, success is not measured through a unique lens; that you must pass through grammar school. In fact, from a personal standpoint, there are lots of so-called academic degree holders who are

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unemployed. On the other hand, technicians are in short supply in Cameroon and frankly, across the world and they are being sought after. I will like to see a day when Ombe college becomes an affiliate of the University of Buea.

Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences.