

Convention KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Evolution of Ombe, Anglophone Cameroon's Pioneer Technical College

A Keynote Speech Delivered at the Maiden Annual Meeting of Ombe Old Students' Association (OOSA), Global Held in Washington, DC, USA, July 22, 2022 by

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Greetings to All Herein Present, and especially to the Invited Guests, Fellow Alumni and other Dignitaries.

I am at once immeasurably gratified and profoundly humbled to accept the unique honor and privilege bestowed upon me by the Organizing Committee to craft and deliver the keynote speech for this OOSA North America Inaugural Convention.

I must confess that identifying and selecting the subject of this speech turned out to be a more challenging issue than I had envisioned. However, upon embracing the truism that this is after all, the first ever major re-union of Ombe alumni in the diaspora, it became logical that a talk that retraces, if only speedily, the evolution of the institution would be apropos.

What currently goes under the appellation, Government Technical High School (GTHS), Ombe was founded in 1952 by the British Colonial Government (BCG) as a trade centre, the Government Trade Centre (GTC), Ombe. The teaching and administrative staff were of British extraction and served as functionaries of the colonial government.

The British colonial government assigned to Ombe four major roles. The first was to train technicians to meet the technical personnel needs of the colonial government and subsequently, the needs of an emerging independent polity, namely Southern Cameroons. The second was to create a competent artisanal class capable of maintaining basic public infrastructure. The third was to contribute to efforts to endow Africans with the education necessary to appreciate government functioning. Finally, the institution was charged with the task of contributing to the creation of an indigenous middle-class in an evolving colonial polity.

In the process, British colonial authorities deliberately restricted the Ombe curriculum to trade courses. This was a calculated strategy by these authorities to avoid the grave error they believed they had committed in their colonial project in India. Here, the British colonial government had embarked on an ambitious general education programme, which produced unintended results. They had, some in their ranks believed, created a native intellectual class that effectively challenged colonial policies in that country. Accordingly, British colonial authorities had come to view any native intellectual class as a viable threat to their authority and power.

Ombe functioned uninterrupted as a trade centre from 1952 to 1961. This is when the institution abruptly shut its doors due to the sudden withdrawal of its British teaching and administrative staff. The withdrawal was an outcome of the demise of British colonial rule in the territory. October 1961 witnessed the amalgamation of British Southern Cameroons-cum-West Cameroon and French-Cameroun-cum-East Cameroun that gave birth to the Federal Republic of Cameroon.

In 1962, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) resuscitated GTC Ombe and assumed full responsibility over its administration. This was part of the agency's efforts to develop the quality of technicians necessary for West Cameroon's technological sustenance in the 20th century and beyond. It would be recalled that this meticulous formatting and transformation of young minds was occurring in West Cameroon that, like almost all African polities, was emerging from nearly a century of brutal European colonialism of the economically exploitative variant.

Geo-socially, Ombe was literally a gated enclave complete with round-the-clock foot patrol security services tucked amidst villages of squalid and dilapidated buildings of improvised materials that manifested conspicuous signs of physical and functional obsolescence. In its heydays, the enclave comprised Senior and Junior Staff Quarters of finely engineered residential structures, a suite of generously equipped offices, classroom and workshop blocks served by paved and well-aligned streets. These facilities were richly punctuated by a system of carefully manicured lawns.

The contrasts between Ombe and localities in both its proximate and distant vicinities in those early days could not have been sharper! One of the pioneer U.S. Peace Corps volunteer teachers at the institution vividly captured the contrast in the following words.

As you drive up the road from Ombe into Mutengene, you see the thatched roof houses, the people living their simple existence. When you think back to the electronic courses you are teaching, to sons and brothers of those people, [sic]. Here is the leap to the 20th century that historians are talking about displayed in rather sharp relief (Quoted by Amin, 1992),

The resuscitated GTC Ombe had at its helm in the capacity of principal, an American, Mr. Sheldon Cole. He had been a functionary of the USAID in Southern Cameroons-cum-West Cameroon since 1960. Cole was recommended for this post by Mr. E.D. Quan, at the time, the Acting Permanent Secretary of the West Cameroon Ministry of Education and Welfare. Cole doubled as the Trades Education Adviser to the West Cameroon Ministry of Education. To facilitate his job as Principal of Ombe, Mr. Cole requested for seven (7) volunteers but was given only four (4), namely Edward Greene, Edward Douglass, Robert Christensen, and Michael Romaine.

Notwithstanding, Mr. Cole, an avid teacher and developmentalist, was avowedly committed to catapult Ombe to the zenith of technical education in Cameroon. To succeed in this connection, he embarked on a program to revamp and broaden the scope of Ombe's course offerings. Accordingly, some general education courses, including English, French, and Civics were added to the curriculum. Thus, with the involvement of the US, and Peace Corps working under the auspices of Mr. Sheldon Cole, GTC Ombe had effectively embarked on a journey to becoming a comprehensive technical college as opposed to simply a trade centre. One of the most notable achievements of this first crop of American Peace Corps volunteers was the development and installation of a closed-circuit television system at the institution. The brainchild of electronic engineer/instructor, Edward Douglas, this was the first such system to go functional in West Cameroon. For a little more than a decade since GTC was resuscitated in 1962, it served as the citadel for training technicians in West Cameroon. Its students were recruited from the best and brightest graduates of primary schools throughout this territory. A pass in the highest echelon, List A, of the Common Entrance Examination to post-primary schools was a prerequisite to participate in the oral interview for admission to the institution. Students were admitted on an academic yearly basis.

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At the end of the four-year technical training program, students wrote the City and Guilds of London Institute Intermediate Craft Examination, and the City and Guilds of London Institute General Course Examination. The former comprised questions on theories and principles of different technical specialties and the actual practice of these specialties, while the former included specialty examination questions in four specific subjects, viz., Mathematics, Science, Processes and Materials, and Technical Drawing.

Technical specialties at Ombe enrolled on a bi-academic yearly basis. Thus, no specialty had First- and Second-Year students; instead, a specialty, say Building Construction, would have First and Third-Year, and Second- and Fourth-Year students during any given Academic Year. This was a cleverly engineered strategy to ensure that the institution never graduated students from any specialty during

two successive academic years. This served to avoid a glut of unemployed graduates from any specific specialty during any given year.

Partially substantiated rumor has it that the Americans who had resuscitated GTC Ombe in 1962 planned to upgrade it into a polytechnic for the formation of full-fledged engineers. Such plans, if they ever existed, as well as the City and Guilds examinations rapidly faded into oblivion and became no more than an entry in the annals of history as part of the many casualties of the political developments that culminated in transforming the Federal Republic of Cameroon into a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon, in 1972.

The emergence of a unitary Cameroonian state ushered a new era with unprecedented consequential changes to Ombe. For starters, Francophone administrators and teachers with no proficiency in the English language were assigned to replace their Anglophone technical education counterparts. The initial round of replacement, including the replacement of the Principal, Chief of Works, General Warden and many workshop heads and teachers occurred in September 1974. This is when a heavily distorted version of Pidgin English 'officially' became the de facto medium of instruction in workshops and classrooms at Ombe. This period also marked the onset of the incessant disappearance of some the institution's most valuable pieces of equipment, including rare tools and machines that distinguished it from its peers throughout Cameroon. These had been used to train the privileged students who passed through the institution since its founding in 1952.

Thus, September 1974 can be viewed as the point at which Ombe began losing its once highly treasured allure. Paradoxically, this is also the time when technical education in Anglophone Cameroon witnessed a significant increase in the number of state-owned and operated government technical secondary schools. Another irony in this connection is the fact that the quantitative increase in the ranks of these schools was never matched by a corresponding increase in the number of Anglophone technical teachers. Consequently, Francophone technical teachers continued to enjoy an inexplicable numerical superiority over their Anglophone peers in the Anglophone regions.

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By the mid-1980s, examinations, particularly the City and Guilds of London Institute for which Ombe was noted, had been replaced with French equivalents such as the Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnel (CAP), the Baccalaureate Technique (Bac-Technique). These were later replaced with the Technical General Certificate of Education (Technical GCE). Efforts to integrate these examinations into the Anglophone subsystem have left much to be desired. Apart from this, the technical schools are graduating individuals that are ill-prepared for roles as technicians. What is the way forward? This is the perennial question that must perforce be addressed in any meaningful initiative to ameliorate the quality of graduates from Ombe and cognate institutions

especially in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. To this end, the following recommendations are proffered.

- ❖ Prohibit the use of Pidgin English as a language of instruction in technical (and of course, other) schools. Therefore, proficiency (preferably, native fluency) in written and verbal English must be instituted as a pre-requisite to teach in the English sub-system of education in Cameroon.
- ❖ Invest in efforts to arm students with the skills necessary function with facility in their respective industries.
- ❖ Reinforce students' competence in technical and general education.
- ❖ Endow students with digital skills by expanding their access to digital technology including digital hardware and software.
- ❖ Align technical and vocational education course offerings to 21st century labour market demands.
- ❖ Accentuate the importance and need of entrepreneurship and work readiness skills in the 21st century labour market.

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My talk begs the following hard-to-ignore questions. Is there a role for OOSA, North America in efforts to rebuild Ombe's image? If so, what is this role? The response to the former question is resoundingly in the affirmative. To address the latter, it is necessary to appreciate the reciprocal relationship between the alumni of an institution and the institution. The relationship is reciprocal because they have a mutual need for each other. Whether known or unbeknownst to its authorities, Ombe needs the support of its alumni, qualified as all who have ever attended the institution. For the institution, it can view its former students as constituting its most loyal supporters and ideal role models for its current students. As for the alumni, by lending a helping hand to the institution to become successful and attain greater heights, they are enhancing the value of their Ombe-issued diplomas and other credentials. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the two parties—OOSA-North America and Ombe—to collaborate in initiatives to restore the institution's image and notoriety.

