

Francophone African

Oral History Project

Interviewer: Today is the 5th November 2016, I'm going to interview you in the relation to our project "Francophone African Oral History" living in the city of Birmingham

Interviewer: Hello

Interviewee: Hello

Interviewer: Can you introduce yourself please? And tell me where were you born.

Interviewee: My birth name is **Ifanga jean Charles**, but when former Congolese President **Mobutu** introduced **The Authenticity Decree**, my name changed to **Ifanga Ekemba**. I was born in Equateur region in the small village called **Monyeka** on the 12th May 1964.

The memory I have from that village, when I was about 3 to 5 years old, I had a big dog which I had named **Gabon** but unfortunately the Dog passed away when we were just about to leave the village as my father was transferred to another village called **Buende** from his job as a tutor, so I was leaving my childhood village with a deep sadness. Since then I had never returned to **Monyeka** village, I grew up in **Mbandaka**.

Interviewer: Tell me about your education, your primary and secondary school.

Interviewee: As my father was tutor, Head teacher, School Inspector and a Coordinator himself, I started school in the very young age of 5. I did my primary school in **Buende** but because my dad was frequently moving around in the different villages and cities, that affected a little of bit my studies but when we finally moved to **Mbandaka** I was able to finish my primary school at **Wangata** school of application in 1976, as we were well settled in **Mbandaka**.

I did my secondary school at **Songa Liyanza** for my guidance subject in literacy as I had ambition to become a lawyer but on my fourth years at the college my dad wanted me to be a doctor, then He placed me into Scientific Studies in Biology and Chemistry which I had completed in 1984. Then I went to **Kinshasa University** to enrol myself in Law Studies to return on my childhood ambition of becoming a lawyer but my father managed himself with the help of his colleagues to enrol me in Medicine in the city of **Kinsangani**.

Unfortunately, I did not get emplacement at the **University of Kinshasa** then my father asked me to go to **Kisangani** to enrol, He indicated his friend **Prosper** to help me but on my big surprised I found out having an emplacement in Medicine, all that was my dad arrangement. I stated my first year in medicine but unfortunately on my second year my dad passed away. After my father passing; I moved to the city of **Lubumbashi** to live with a relative **Mr Sadi Ngampu**, I realised that to continue in medicine studies will be long and difficult for me as my dad passed away and there were no students funding available, I had decided to do Social Science in Sociology subject at **Higher Institute in Social Studies** in the city of **Lubumbashi**, I achieved my Sociology studies in 1987-88.

And suddenly my dad's friend **Prosper** became a Security administrator in the city of **Katanga**, so he directly promoted me in **SNIP** (National Service of Intelligence and Protection) in Immigration

Department under former president **Mobutu** regime. I was then transferred to work in **Kasumbalesa** for 2 years.

I realised that I needed to continue my studies, then I returned to **Lubumbashi** to do Political Science with the help of Professor **Mondonga**, to facilitate me enrol in Political Science High degree. During that first year in May, the tragedy of students massacre **Latiti Mboka** had happened, which had pushed me to move back to **Kinshasa**, I got married then came to **Europe** afterward.

I had spent couple years in **Germany** but I did not have opportunity to study but when I moved in over here in **England**, I could enrol at **Coventry University** in French and Business subject which I have respectively a Certificate and a Diploma. I did also **AIDS** course in a **London College** to allow me raise **HIV** awareness in my community, I have completed that course and I was credited with a diploma. I did also training at the Home Office as an Immigration Adviser Level 2.

I'm currently doing some online studies in Leadership Management at the **University of Stratford** and Community mental health practice at a college in **Glasgow**. That is an overview of my educational background beside other technical or jobs training throughout different activities that I had over taken.

Interviewer: Let's go back in **The Congo** during your studies. How were you spending your Holidays?

Interviewee: Generally, in my primary school years; I was with my family, so my dad used to send us to the village in the aim of learning more about our culture, to bond with our grandfathers, grandmothers, other relatives and to learn other activities. On the interest of learning our culture, my dad used to speak to me in **Mongo** (my tribe's language) and **French**. I used to speak **French** other places but when I would be home, my dad would only speak to me in **Mongo**, that's why I can speak **Mongo** like a **village** born.

In the secondary school, I was spending my holidays in the same ways as in my primary school. During my University years in **Lubumbashi**, as I'm from a military family, I would take advantage of military roadmap at the end of term after passing my courses, then I would take military flight to **Kinshasa** for holidays. I would also do return journeys to the city of **Bandundu** and the village of **Kenge**; when I would feel like not going to holidays, I would stay in **Lubumbashi**; until I had established a good friendship with a couple people that were working with some of former president **Mobutu's** children, getting a flight became an easy task for me.

Interviewer: How many children are there in your family?

Interviewee: My dad has 14 children, I' a twin but my other twin had passed away; my dad had a couple twins. My dad was in a polygamous marriage, He had children with both my mother and her younger sister, when my mother was away traveling, her younger sister came to visit us and my dad took her as well, when my mother came back, her sister report to her everything that happened. So, my mother ordered my father to marry traditionally her younger sister as second wife instead of getting other wives outside the family, in our tribe's culture you could marry sisters within the same family.

My dad passed away early at the age of 44 only, and my mother has also passed away 5 years ago, out of 14 children, there are 5 girls and 9 boys, all of us have children and grandchildren.

Interviewer: Now, can you tell us a little of bit of your experience coming to Europe.

Interviewee: Coming to **Europe** was like an adventure in need of discovering the western world, I had set myself an goal to have my children born over here in **Europe** because of the advantage I saw from students who were studying abroad, they were **executives officers**, so I told myself; if I have my children born in **Europe**, they will have a good education and they will not need student funds to study and they will be **executives** back home, in that context I wanted to come to Europe. When I get married to my wife, as her father was an ambassador it was easy for us to get visas to come over here, we came in **Europe** in 1991; all my 5 children were born here in **Europe**, my first child is nearly 24 years old and the last is 10 years old. The last one is born in **England** and the rest of my children were born in **Germany**.

Interviewer: What was your first impression when you arrived in **Europe**?

Interviewee: At first, I felt disqualified in the sense that back home I was a qualified executive and suddenly in **Europe** I had to go work in the farm, picking up raisins, potatoes to earn a little money to send back home, physically it was a challenge for me because it was not sort of work I used to do back home. I could not see myself work as an executive while there were so many of **European** born executives, so I felt that I did not have any chance at all. That is the first difficulties I came across in **Belgium**. My wife had worked as House keeper and cleaner but I could not see myself working in the farm as I was an executive back home; I finally realised that I must do it to survive because I had no choice. That's one of my first challenges, also to integrate, getting enrolled in the course and getting a stay was difficult.

I started worrying about all those wasted time waiting to get a status, as my friends that I had finished studies before them and had helped to get jobs, were executives officers and administrators in national security department, me going back home I would not be at their level but they advised me to go back and rebuild my career, but I could not go back empty hands. If I had stayed in **Congo**, even in the economic difficulties that faces our country, it would have been possible for me to save money and eventually built a house.

So, what happens when people go back home with empty hands with all those difficulties they have faced in **Europe**, they look healthy but sometimes they do not have a place to stay, you would have to go stay with those who envy people who live in Europe because you do not have a place to sleep. In another view, it is a wasted time.

Sometimes you have the advantage of seeing business opportunities that those who live there do not see, if you have a financial support you could set up a good business back home.

In term of work and qualification, I left **Belgium** and moved to **Germany**, I came across similar difficulties that I faced in **Belgium**, I could not speak **German** and I felt disqualified, you must return to school to have a chance getting a job.

As my wife was pregnant, I could not go to school, also if you don't have a status you cannot access a good education, learning **German** is was difficult as it's not taught back home compare to **English** which we learned at school, it was very difficult for us.

I had no choice than go to work in the farm of 3 kilometres in large, I would have to pick up carrots and fill up many baskets, they would pay you per basket, sometimes you get **50p** per basket, **1 deutschmark** for two baskets; I was working from early morning to 6 pm and I had to use my bicycle to travel, I would feel pain all over my body and my wife would massage me with a hot water like they do to a woman in labour, all that hard work and pain would give me just **20 deutschmarks** a day but those who used to physical works would make **60 deutschmarks**, that

different is due to the fact that we considered ourselves as qualified executives back home but when arrived in **Europe** you are automatically disqualified, that is a big challenge we had faced. Eventually I had no choice than to move on, so I had to position myself as qualified worker, I obtained a permit in **Forklift** which allowed me get jobs and learn **German**.

Interviewer: What made you leave **Germany** and move to **England**?

Interviewee: Difficulties to integrate in German society, as I was explaining earlier, as executive myself, I wanted my children to study in Europe and go back work in The Congo, I did not plan my family to stay in Europe for good. In **Germany** I was not able to help my children for their homework, I could not speak **German**, in order to participate on their education as a father, I had to make a choice between **Switzerland** and **England**, I also asked my wife to go to **America** to see if we could move over there, I went to **Switzerland** and I had found a similar system as in **Germany**; **America** being far away and **English** being an international language, we had decided to move to **England**, we felt that it was a good environment to educate our children, also as I could speak **English** that I had learnt in The Congo, it was not necessary for me to learn **English** again, I directly found a job and I could easily educate and guide my children in the right direction; that had helped my children to get good marks at school. I felt comfortable and well-integrated in **England** than in **Germany**, especially in term of language, I can easily express myself in **England** but in **Germany** I could not, as I could not even have access for language course over there; I could have only speak a little **German** that I had picked up on the street. I heard that accessing the language course in **Germany** had become accessible for everyone but unfortunately I was too late for me.

If I should compare **Germany** to **England**, socially **Germany** is better than **England**, if I was someone who is only after money, I would had stayed in **Germany** with my five children because the child benefit I was getting for one child in **Germany** is equivalent for the money I had received for four children in **England**; if it was all just about the money, I would have sacrificed my children education and stayed in **Germany**. I wanted my children to have a good education and be qualified, that is what had motivated me the most to come in **England**.

Interviewer: Why the choice of **Birmingham**?

Interviewee: As a new comer in **England**, I said to myself that leaving in the big city like **London** where there is many people; it would be a difficult challenge for me and I would not have my space in the big city, I would prefer to live in the county side or small city which would allow me to easily integrate; I went to live with my cousin Patrice, at Sabin's house in **Nottingham**. After a while I had discovered that **Birmingham** was a second large city after **London**, then I started visiting **Birmingham** and as I am a **Pastor**, I started up a church and after six months of church service I moved to **Birmingham** in a council house with my family.

Interviewer: Was it easy to integrate in **Birmingham**?

Interviewee: Would not say easy, I am a hard worker by nature, I fight against any challenges that come across knowing that God is beside me wherever I put my feet on. I do not give up; I only give up by God willing. When my children joined me, the whole **Birmingham** was a construction site; even my children were confused, asking themselves whether **Birmingham** was an **African** city. In **Germany**, my children had not had opportunity to meet a lot of African people or people of

African descendant but over here they saw a lot of **Somalia** people, **Jamaicans**; a multi culture environment, that also made me feel like I'm in **Africa**.

The fact of seeing many African well integrated in **British** society, **Africans** working as taxis drivers, some of them doctors; which was difficult for me in **Germany** when trying to work as a Bus driver, I did not have any access of getting a jobs being an African; but over here I had realised that people of **African descendant** had access in all echelon, I felt comfortable and willing to integrate even more.

I set up all my plans, projects and objectives. I had started to research some appropriate schools for my children, I had found a nice school for my first daughter and I did the same to my boys as well; they all started going to school.

I had got a council house for my all family, I wanted to continue my studies but I was told that because I was an **European citizen**, I had to contribute in tax at least three years to be eligible for student loan to have access in **University**.

I had waited three years and directly I started helping my community, advising them as most of them did not have any experience living in the Western world, I had put all my experience that I had pick up across **Europe** and starting to help my community; specially in health service, raising awareness on **AIDS** and **HIV** virus, promoting health issue within the community as many of them used to fear testing themselves, I would encourage them to take advantage of all the health service put on their disposition instead of dying without knowing their status, testing would help a early diagnosis and start treatment which would make them live longer.

I had worked quite a long period in a Health organisation here in **Birmingham** called THT (Terrence Higgins Trust). I was getting every three or four month, amount of **£2500** from **Aston Pride** just to work within my community in health awareness. I also volunteered helping my community in finding jobs, writing CVs, filling forms and doing training.

I was hired by the **Birmingham** city council as a street adviser around my borough, doing door to door, advising and helping people on benefit to get into work and showing them the advantage of doing trainings.

After a while I stopped working for the council and enrolled myself at **Coventry University** to continue my studies.

Interviewer: In term of the experience you had picked up in **Europe** and the values you had back home. What would you take back to Congo and what value had you took from **Congo** and brought to **Europe**?

Interviewee: That's a fundamental question, like I said before, I'm currently studying subject "**Community Mental Health, Psychiatry Practice**" at a college in **Glasgow**, as a **Pastor**, I'm also a tutor in the spiritual view. We have a big problem in our community, in Africa we believe that **Europe** it's all sparkles, everything roll like train on the railway, thinking that if you come in **Europe** you would make a good life, your living standard would change for the better, but in my own experience, specially when I arrived in **England**, it's catastrophic.

In term of cultural value as you have asked, back home we knew family value, a child knows who is father, mother and relatives, I child knows how to value elders, show them respect when see them on the street.

A woman knows how to position herself and a Man knows how to position himself, but when coming in **Europe**, especially in **England**, it's a **culture shock** and that can bring upset in some people life in our community, that is why I'm doing "**Community Mental Health, Psychiatry Practice**" course.

In **Congo**, we usually have a family budget, when the father work and bring his salary back home; there is no conflict even if there are always problem where people live together but I had never heard that a husband has killed his wife or a wife poison her husband, a man engaging in sexual activities with his own niece, that is a rare circumstances in **Congo**.

As a pastor and community leader, I have noticed that my community is deeply sick, we see people walk but culturally they are all sick, people think that everything that is happening in **Europe** it is the right way of doing things, men are piercing their ears, became gays; that is something that does not exist back home in **Congo** when growing up but those practices had started quite a long time in **Europe**.

Over here, a woman would fight a man for the sake of equality, that is why if you allow your wife to go to work or study then she would change her behaviour and consider herself as superior to man; men are having a hard time in **Europe**. There are some false and traps; **Europe** being industrial, people are hard workers, they would work during the week and go clubbing at the weekend, instead of staying together in the family, eating on the same table or praying together, it's a different story over here, church is for elder people, not for the youth. Here people prefer to go drinking in the pub and when they would return home so drunk, they would take a gun, kill wife and children. That violence brought legislation in against those acts.

We as foreigners, they seduced us with sparkles, futuristic buildings and technology but there is big gap in living standard between us and them; our life is like a punishment.

A lot of **Congolese** had been jailed by ignorance, the **authorities** should had had warned our community on how live in **British** society.

Today, a man would work hard and bring his wife and children in **Europe** on the ground of family reunion, seeing all those benefit advantages that come along; tax credit, child benefit and free school; advantages that does not exist back home.

Benefit becomes a source of getting rich, man would start having ambitious to build a house from children benefit and willing to behave like in **Africa**, managing money, deciding how much the wife would spend for the shopping; women not being well supervised from the start, that would become cause of conflict, not only with wife but conflict with children as well.

The man would prefer to support his cousins and nieces back home, assuming that they are the most in need, paying their fees and forgetting that those who live over here are submitted to **Western** way of life, as children are confronted with social pressure at school and wanting to keep up in fashion; if they do not get want they are expecting, a child would rebel against parent and start a street life, just because parent wanted fulfil their project using child benefit; all those conflicts within the family would cause chaos and probably bring parent to a divorce after maybe three or four years of marriage.

Talking about values from **Congo**, divorce it's like an accident but not as easy as here in **Europe** where couples are divorcing very often; in **Congo** we do not have many sort of family like in **Europe** where two women can form a family or two men can adopt a child a form a family and all of that is protected by the law which is not the case in **Congo**. Those things brought upset and confuse on people because of **culture chock**, more because of ignorance and not paying attention to **European** way of life; and you would see many people having problems in the society, local authorities and social care.

It would be beneficial for us as a community to draw a line and regain our values; most of people I would visit at the hospitals, were mentally ill or had suffered with stroke. I finally realised that I came in **Europe** more for scientific and development interest but moral values that had learnt from my parent in the **village** are very important.

There is no sense of family here in **Europe**, you would see a son live in the same building with his mother but they do not see each other face to face, maybe just a call from the son to his mother; I have seen a mother died in her apartment for many days but her four children who live in the same city as her, not being aware of their mother passing, only neighbours who informed the police for the tragedy, as here everything is in charge of the authority, even your own child is first in charge of the authority.

The state allow abortion and you can do so from the beginning of pregnancy, the hospital is free of charge; if you give birth to child and try to punish them when they are being stubborn, social care would come and take child away from you; that kind of issues bring pain in our community.

The consequences of those matters make our children ending up in delinquency, doing drugs, mafia and gun gangs, which put many of them in prisons.

If we could set up a project to educate and guide our children in the right direction, it would be a good thing.

In term of development, we can bring the knowledge gained over here and make difference in **Africa**, start up businesses that would give people jobs. In term of cultural and moral values, it is very poor in **Europe** compare to **Africa**. Our people want to copy the **European** way of life but that is not a good thing to do.

Interviewer: Where are your siblings? Are they here in **Europe** or in **Congo**?

Interviewee: I'm by myself in **Europe**, the rest of my siblings are in **Kinshasa**; some of them are working, other doing small businesses. Most of us got married with children; myself I'm 52 years old and the last one is almost 32 years old.

Interviewer: Are you in contact with all of them?

Interviewee: Yes, I'm in permanent contact with all of them; most of the help come from here when someone is sick, the help always come from **Europe** as there is no health assurance in **Congo**, people can manage to survive but when it come to big issues like health problems, we need to help if there is possibility; we grew up with love for one another and we still have a steady relationship between us.

Interviewer: What do you need the most since you left **Congo**?

Interviewee: First, you cannot be comfortable in a **foreign** country; the living conditions over here are different to ours, this is an **artificial** world but back home is more **natural** way of life; I would leave **Kinshasa**, travel to Maluku, **Nsele** and take water board to **Brazaville** through **Mpila**; I would take boat from **Kinshasa** to **Kisangani**.

We have natural fruits like raisins; we eat wild fruits that people pick up for free and sell; God already planted for us.

We eat the fruits that monkeys eat. We eat fresh food back home compare to here; we grow cassava leaves just on the backyard, fresh food straight from the villages and cooked in your eyes. I would have benefit more in **Congo** than here, that is what I miss the most, natural way of living; I would take my car from **Ipen** where I used to live to **Ndolo**, I would park my car and walk to fishing port to wait until fish men bring their fishes; I would eat freshly cooked fishes at the port while drinking a glass of beer; such a joy of living which is not the case in **Europe** where fishes are most of time frozen.

The same as meat, people hunt wild animal and sell them fresh, natural way of life. My dream is to go and spend my retirement in **Congo** than to stay in **Europe**. In case I have the health issue, I may come over here to treat myself; I'm missing home so much.

Interviewer: What makes you stay in **England**? As you miss home that much.

Interviewee: The means are not met to allow me go back, maybe if I'm lucky enough to win the lottery, sure I would invest here but would invest more in **Congo** where I would spend the most of my time. But because there is no assurance and I'm not guaranteed to find a job, I have not even invested in my country yet; that is what makes me being retained here because at least here there is job seeker allowance, council accommodation and access to health service if you do not have a job.

However, some of the training and studies we are doing here, it's to prepare our return back home which would profit to the country. I have had my children and grand children in here, that is also what retain me in **Birmingham**; my first child has two kids here in **Birmingham**, we meet up every **Saturday**, if they have not see meet for a while they would call me on the phone. Also the fact that my son is in prison, I cannot just go back home leave him like that, all those circumstances stop me for going back.

Interviewer: We are almost at the end of the interview. What would you like to say, something that I have not asked.

Interviewee: That's a tough one, I have spoken most about difficulties that faces our community but I also experimented those things myself, I had problem with the law, I had been condemned and I had changed. I would say that I consider myself as a **victorious** in term of challenges I had faced, I always learn from my mistakes and do better later on; that's what gave me experience and at this present time, I go to prisons to advice and give support to those facing difficulties, I help families with advice and guidance; I also help those who have stubborn children; using the word of God as well.

I have answered your questions as a human being but as a pastor, spiritually I did not know that I would come over here; if God knew all these, I think that God had put me into a challenge to test my faith but I know that everything end up well for those who love God.

We should learn from our mistakes, take those experiences to help next generation.

I do not regret my presence in **Birmingham**; on the contrary, I have had gain a lot of experiences and skills that would help back home as well as here.

Interviewer: Would you share your bad experience that you came across in here?

Interviewee: Of course, my own son had a fight with his friend and stabbed his friend who died six hours later and my son was sentenced to 16 years in prison, at that time he was only 16 years old, now he's 20 years old and still serving his sentence.

As I said came here most for my children, my first child has two kids which is a good thing for me to have grandchildren but I came here for her education, she is almost 24 years old now but I'm still struggling with her; I feel like my plan has fell.

I came here married but due to children problems, I had broken up with my wife, I was given a restraining order by the authority while I was going to court, I could not visit my children. My wife felt like I was not taking my responsibilities as a father, she had moved to **Germany** with the last two kids, they only come to visit us on holidays; it's a broken family. In **Congo**, we grew up in the extended family that never split up but I only experimented it over here, which is not an easy task.

I had a mortgage that I had paid for 9 years but the lack of paid jobs due to problems I had with children which had damaged my **CRB** (Criminal Record Bureau) and me only working within my community and living myself in the same house which made it difficult to rent it out, I was not able to pay for the house and end up by losing it. I became homeless; it may be easy to new comer but someone like me who came in Europe at the age of 26, I'm 52 years old now; becoming homeless is awful and I was put in a same accommodation with drugs addict; that made me moved to **Coventry** to finds my own place, which was not an easy task.

Finding a job was also difficult for me as I had problems with the authorities, I did my probation but it is always something that comes out when looking for a job; I had fought to regain my right to work with the **DBS** (Disclosure and Barring Service) but the police always write reports on my crime record which makes managers reject me on jobs recruitments, that's a pain for me.

In that context that I had learnt to help those in the same situation I was in. I would prefer that husband and wife to be separate than to stab one another to death, which would send you to prison and children would end up lost. According to God kingdom, if your hand is preventing you go to heaven; you better go with that hand, instead of stabbing my wife just because jealousy or money conflict.

I visit young people in prisons as pastor to encourage them and give them second chance to allow them integrate the community once out of prison because we are all one. They need to be good people when they are out of prison because a lot of people get radicalised and change to bad behaviour in prison; we have to treat them with love and consideration, a lot of people collect money and give me to hand over to their siblings in prison.

I help families with stubborn children; I mentor them. "**The community mental health course**" that I'm doing now, it's the main element that help me to share my experience and use it as a community education, telling people to find jobs, advising them on how to avoid driving under influence or using phone while driving, all those acts would take you to prison and make you lose your driving licence.

In this country, children are subject to **western** way of life, child benefit should be used for their needs even though parent benefit from it; but most the money should be spent for the children instead of spending the money to support those in Africa which would lead children to rebel and you would find it impossible to reach your goals. Wife has to be humble and manage family budget alongside her husband with love and understanding, instead of fighting to be equal to man. Even if the wife earns more than the husband, she should always respect her man; you would not stab your other half.

Unfortunately here if the woman were the tenant, she would end up throwing the man outside the house; ending up lost, getting ill, stressed, depressed and start having high blood pressure issue; which is not easy for a human being. People should leave their problems to God; most of people in our community are ill, they need guidance and be educated; people should recognised that they are ill and take the right way because we cannot continue like this.

Interviewer: We are at the end of the interview, thank you very much for your time.