

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: EMILE TABEA [AFRICA – IVORY COAST]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

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C = CHRISTOPH

E = EMILE

Tape 08.36

C: Could you state your full name, where you are from, your ethnicity and your address in Lowell.

E: My name is Emile Tabea. I live in the Highlands on Barclay Street. I am from the Ivory Coast, West Africa. I am married with two kids, a ten year old boy and a seven year old girl. I came to this country in 1982. I was going to be a college teacher back in my home country. Back then I was an English major and one of my professors was from Lowell. He was in his 17th year of teaching English and French in the Ivory Coast. He decided to come back to the US. I had his address and we kept writing to each other. When I was going into my second year of graduate studies I wrote him a letter saying that “I would like to come to the US someday to pursue my education.” “What do you mean someday,” he asked, “come now” I said “Ok, send me the required paperwork.” He did and within four months I came to the U.S., and I have been here since.

C: Did you come straight to Lowell?

E: Directly to Lowell. Since I was an English major, I wanted to teach English. I knew a little bit of English so I stayed with him for two weeks before going on my own.

C: Did you live in Abidjan?

E: Yes, I was in Abidjan. I was going to the Ecole Normale Superieure – a Teacher’s College.

C: So you came straight to Lowell?

E: Yes, I did and I applied to U Lowell. They said: "We can not really accept you because you came from a French speaking country. We would like you to take ESL courses first." "But I know English so I can study what I want." I told them. I wanted to study Political Science. So I went to Northern Essex where I was tested. I did fine on the English test.

C: Did you have any preconceptions about the US before coming here?

E: No, I didn't. Because I did not watch too much TV. I was always in the books. I knew things would be different for me. I came here in August, and in September when the cool weather started I almost went back. My friend said, "It is not that bad. Don't go back." I remember my first winter without a winter jacket and warm shoes. But I stayed and I changed my status from B2 visitor status to F1 which is a student visa.

C: Then you switched over to a green card?

E: Yes, exactly, when I got married to a US citizen. I was married for five years, but things didn't work out.

C: How long have you lived on Barclay Street?

E: I moved there in July of 2000. Prior to Barclay, I lived on Pawtucket Boulevard for 10 years. After my first marriage, I was going back and forth to France. I met my wife and we got married on December 22, 1990.

C: Did you have family in France? Is that why you went there?

E: Yes, my cousin. He had been in France since 1975. He was the one I started to visit in 1988.

C: You live in the Highlands. Do you consider yourself being part of this neighborhood? Because part of this study.... We are trying to figure out... because immigrants historically tended to live in neighborhoods or immigrant enclaves. Do you still feel like you live in an African neighborhood or an enclave?

E: I don't feel like I am part of the neighborhood. I feel like an outsider. I don't get involved in whatever is happening. I don't even know what is happening in the neighborhood. I don't know how different things could be, but I don't feel part of the neighborhood. When it comes to gathering, getting together, it is mostly with members of the Ivorian Community. But I think it would be better if it could be otherwise. Not just the community I already know. I think that would enrich life more. But as of now, that is not the case.

C: So you travel frequently outside of Lowell to meet up with your Ivorian friends?

E: Yes. We are a bit scattered but when something bad happens, we all get together and help out. That is how we have been meeting.... But we try to get together at least two or three times a year just for the fun of it and to socialize. But even now that is not the case because people are busy working. We only call when something bad happens to somebody and we all go to that person to help out.

C: Do you still go to the Ivorian Church? Or because of your minister leaving do you not go?

E: That's right. I stopped going. I was going to church with mixed ethnic groups in Pelham. I went there for about eight years until a pastor came from the Ivory Coast. We went to his church and after four years things did not work out. He stopped doing the work of a pastor. So I went back to where I started. I have been back there for two years now.

C: There is a rich variety of African people living in Lowell maybe as many as six thousands.

E: Yes and the majority are from English speaking countries. Fascinating! I remember where there less than three hundred Africans in the mid-80s.

C: Yes there are a lot of Sierra Leonians and Liberians, and a lot of people from Kenya and Cameroon.

E: Yes. They have a nice association. They are organized better than any other group I know. The Cameroonians, they have an organization called Camola.

C: You have talked a little bit about your family and how you met your second wife and your kids. With your kids what are your main concerns?

E: My main concern is education. What I see here in the U.S. is a relaxed K- 12 school system. I don't think kids are challenged much and I can see them getting to college and having a tough time because there is no challenge from the beginning. We are so busy working that we don't have the time to help them as much as we would like. That is my concern.

C: Are you sometimes worried a little bit about preserving your kids' African identity? And how are you going to do that or is that not an issue?

E: We have been trying. To give you an example they don't eat any kind of food besides African food. I've never seen them asking for a cheeseburger or hotdog. With this we are doing a great job. The kind of foods they ask for is African food. They like it and want us serve it again.... My wife is good at making what they ask for. That helps them not to think about Cheeseburgers or hotdogs.

C: I know you were trying to get home over the last summer but there were passport issues. Are you still hoping to go back to Cote D'Ivoire this summer?

E: Yes, this summer in August. In fact, yesterday I attempted to make reservations for August. I am checking prices and hopefully by the end of the month I will make reservations for three weeks.

C: I know this is to see your family. But is it also important for your kids to go home and see and meet family?

E: Yes, exactly to meet family, cousins. But it would be a good thing for them to make a connection. Talking about culture, we try to limit TV time because that can have an influence on children.

C: Which place do you consider your home? Ivory Coast, the US, Lowell...?

E: I would say both, the Ivory Coast and the U.S. I have homes in both countries. When I go to the Ivory Coast I have a pillow I can lay my head on as well as here. ... I consider both countries my home but probably here more than there right now. You know what I tell my wife. "Do you think we should go there and contribute to the economy?" And she would say "No." We have been here for so long that we have lost touch with the system there and I don't think we should return. I think she is right because we now know two different systems. One in which when you try to get administrative papers, it's like pulling teeth. For a birth certificate, for example, you can wait weeks whereas as here you get it right on the spot.

C: Are you thinking of going back there to retire?

E: Yes, I will be going there to retire. When I reach retirement age that will be the place to go.... It is comfortable living there....

C: I know we have talked about this in the past, and I have heard this from other African immigrants in the US. The issue of supporting your family here but also the expectation of supporting your extended family back home....

E: Yes, and we do that a lot. Almost every other month someone would call to ask for help. And we do it because we believe that we have a little more than they do. So we don't hesitate to go half way to help out. Sometimes we go all the way but most of the time we go half way. We have needs also so we can not go all the way all the time. The African culture is such that a person is defined by his contribution to his family. That is very different.

C: In the West it is based on the individual -- in African cultures family and lineage plays a more important role?

E: Yes it does. Your contribution defines you. Your contribution to the community, to your family, and to your extended family.... What you do defines you as a person. If someone is in need and you don't help, you are nobody. That is how we define a person....

C: You obviously speak excellent English and French. What other languages do you speak?

E: French is my native language English I had to study. I used to speak two other dialects. I have lost them. At home it is French, so that when the kids go back to the Ivory Coast they won't be lost. They can make their needs known. Now that they are getting older, they stopped speaking French.

C: You are still working at Cambridge College?

E: Yes, I started there two years ago in February. There you start as an adjunct with two courses. If you get good evaluations you get promoted to the rank of senior faculty. That is how they do things.

C: Do you still work for the city?

E: Yes, but only part-time, 15 hours because I have been doing that for 17 years. I have a hard time dropping something that I like to do.

C: So you work two jobs?

E: Somewhat. Fifteen hours on the city job and part time at Cambridge College. Just the way I want things to be right now.

C: We all know teaching.... takes a lot of time.

E: Yes, you take a lot of it home. The other job I don't take it home. It's simple. All you have to do is to keep the system running, make things easier for all who are part of the system.

C: Your wife works too?

E: Yes in France she was studying fashion design. So when she first came to the U.S. she did that for two years.... Then she went on to her second choice which is childcare. So we have a little childcare center in our house. It is working out fine. We are contributing to the community

C: So the kids you have in the house, are they African kids?

E: All different, one African kid, two Asian kids, two Latino kids, different ethnic groups.

C: Do you like your job now? Do you think you are going to stick with that?

E: Yes, I like it. I like places where people make you comfortable and give you the resources you need to be successful. I think that means a lot. I think I will stay there for as long as they let me.

C: Have you been back much to the Ivory Coast since you came to this country?

E: I came to this country in 1982 and I have been back three times since. If we go in August it will be the fourth time.

C: Is this the first time for your kids?

E: Yes, this will be the first time for them. It will be different for them.

C: Do you have people from the Ivory Coast coming to visit you?

E: No, but from France yes. We have been trying to get my wife's sister to visit. She says that she is not ready yet. Because she just started a new business and she wants to get things squared away first.

C: When you have family come from France, how long do they usually stay here and what do you do with them?

E: Each time that they come they stay for one month. We go to Boston, Harvard Square which is my favorite spot to walk around.

C: Do you like the book stores?

E: Yes I live in them.... I take them downtown Lowell but that was the time when businesses moved out and it wasn't as active. Now it looks like it is becoming active again.

C: Do you feel like the city has improved a lot since you have moved here?

E: Yes, in the mid 80s it was like a jungle. Lots of gangs, when you read the paper back then all you here is gangs and shootings. But we haven't heard too much of that. I don't know maybe that is due to the community policing.... I would say less violence now than in the mid 80s. In the mid 80s I thought I was going to move out. But I didn't want to leave the university where I was going. I was living on Merrimack Street then in the early 80s and I could see drug dealers. You open the window and they were standing right there. And the police would come shouting "Don't move." I think things have gotten better.

C: Did you take your family to the National Parks at all on visits?

E: No, where is the National Park?

C: In the downtown area, where the old factories are.

E: Oh, we went there once. I think we will do it again this summer. Very nice.

C: Part of the reason I am asking about the National Park is that is who this project is for and there is some concern about the park, a realization that they could do a better job attracting new immigrant groups. So part of the things we are trying to figure out with this study along with other things is getting, recovering and exploring stories like yours. The park is also trying to figure out what would make a person like you more interested in going to the park. What can be done to attract people from the African Community? Would you feel if say they advertised a history of Africans in Lowell, would that entice you to go down there?

E: Yes, yes, I think that would definitely encourage people. Immigrant groups from different countries.... That might attract them. I saw some emails. The Taste of Lowell....

C: Yes, the Taste of Lowell like the taste of Zimbabwe.

E: What do they do at those?

C: I think they usually maybe show an African movie; they do some traditional African dance; and those sort of things. If there was a Taste of the Ivory Coast or a Taste of Cameroon, a Taste of Ghana, would that entice you to go downtown?

E: Yes, that would be good.

C: You are very active in the Ivorian Community. Now you are becoming active in the African Association. Now that you are a citizen, do you vote in local elections?

E: Yes, I do but not as much as I should.

C: So you are obviously registered to vote. But who do you think has the political power in Lowell? And as an African do you feel you have access to the political power in Lowell? Do you feel that the city councilmen reach out to you?

E: No, I don't think they have. I have never... maybe they don't feel they should. We should figure how to get African communities involved in and be part of the city. We need a good politician to do that.

C: Do you think if there where an African running for city council would you be more enticed to vote and support that person?

E: It depends on the candidate's ideas.

C: So you just don't back anybody?

E: No, I go for ideas and what plan you have. Not just because someone is from the Ivory Coast or African in general.

C: One of the frequent criticisms that is put to cities in Massachusetts like Lowell, but also in other places, like Boston and Lawrence, is that there is not many new immigrants. Whether it's South East Asians, Africans, Brazilians, Hispanics, or Indians. There is not much representation of these newer groups. Would you like to see more of that?

E: You mean in politics? Yes, there isn't. I would like to see more. But are members of these groups interested? That is the question. Maybe they can be encouraged to participate.

C: What might be a reason that people are not interested? Too busy working two jobs?

E: Yes, that is one of the reasons. But maybe they are not interested in politics altogether. In most developing countries, politics is a risky business. So maybe they still have that in their mind that you have to be a strong person to be in politics. Politics is for people who are strong, tough, and not just people who have ideas. Maybe it is still that mentality.

C: Sort of African politics, the "big man" mentality.

E: Exactly. But what they don't understand is that this is a democracy and you can run for office and there won't be any repercussions from anybody, which is different from many developing countries. But it would be a good idea if Africans could get involved in local politics.

C: Have you personally experienced tensions between different ethnic groups in Lowell? Have you ever faced discrimination? Have you had negative interactions?

E: No. I have never experienced tensions. Back in my own country I did. Probably more there than here. Here never, but in the Ivory Coast, two times. Which is too much. In most African countries there are different ethnic groups. The ethnic group in power controls everything. Those not in power are controlled and are told what to do and you can't get anything that they don't want you to get. That is one of the reasons why I didn't hesitate to leave the country. Because when I was in teachers college, I wanted to go to graduate school. My goal was to teach at the university level. But the government in power had decided where I should teach based on people's last names: secondary level and not college. By last name they know where you are from, from which region of the country.

C: So you don't feel like you have experienced that here?

E: No.

C: Do you feel that there are tensions between different ethnic groups in Lowell? Have you experienced that?

E: No, I haven't really seen that. Maybe there is but I don't think I have seen that.

C: What are your aspirations for your future and your family's future? What would you like to see maybe for the city's future?

E: For my kids' future, I would like to see them challenged in school. When you are challenged from a young age you can do more later. I want them to go through college with no difficulties and not have to drop out. I am afraid they are not challenged enough.... I tell teachers that. I work with teachers and I tell them they should challenge the kids not just give them things that they always do and don't have to think through. Some teachers do and some don't. Unfortunately the majority of them don't. I am concerned about that. But what can I do? Maybe that's why I went into education, to work with teachers.

C: You can do little by little.

E: Yes, if I have teachers in front of me, teachers who are willing to come back and take classes that makes me happy. Because if you come to my class, I will challenge you and I want you to do the same when you leave. So, if someone gets an A, they know they deserve it. So that is my concern. I went to a forum about two months ago and a participant complained to the panel, that their children are not being challenged enough. A panelist answered that it is not the school's job to challenge kids, it should be the parents' job. So, I said, "How can parents do it?" "That's a teachers job; that is what they are getting paid for." Do your part but also educate parents to do the same. Both sides have a role to play.

C: Is there a question that you think I should have asked you that I didn't ask you?

E: I think you covered all the questions.

C: If there could have been a question that you could have asked yourself, what would it have been?

E: I think we have covered it all.

C: Thank you so much for meeting with me Emile. We really appreciate it and we will be in touch.

E: My pleasure. Anytime.