

Oral History Interview Transcript

Course Title: Energy in World Civilizations

Institution: University of Chicago

Student Name: Astrid Pene

Interview Date: May 9, 2024

Oral History Transcript

Interview conducted between Felix Pene and Astrid Pene over Zoom on May 9th, 2024 at 6:15PM. Some sections translated from French.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay, where are my questions? So, to start, can you briefly introduce yourself and describe your current or past profession?

[Felix Pene]

Okay. My name is Felix Pene. I'm a U.S. citizen. My country of origin is Cameroon. That is in Central Africa. I have been in a lot of professions. In school, I learned electricity and electronics. Later, I was a journalist. I went to school to learn journalism. So, that is one of the professions I've been in for the first, I think, 15 years of my professional life. After that, I think I moved to the U.S. During the integration process, I worked as a parking attendant. The time for me to learn, to improve my English. And after the parking attendant, I worked as a plumber. During that time... No, after the plumbing, I chose, because I wanted to return to school, so I chose to drive a cab because the schedule was a little bit more flexible. So, I was working as a cab driver in the city of Chicago while going to school at the same time. And I was learning electronics and computer technology because I wanted to integrate the field of healthcare, but in the technological side. So, after my associate degree in electronics and computers, I went to work in the medical field. First, in the factory where I used to build healthcare devices, medical equipment, if you can say, in short. Then I moved on to work as a biomedical engineer while still going to school with a Bachelor's in Information Technology, IT. So, that is briefly my background.

[Astrid Pene]

Thank you. So, you grew up in Cameroon, you went to France for school, and now you live in the United States. To start off with, growing up in Cameroon, what was your experience of energy? What were the energy sources that you saw, that you used?

[Felix Pene]

Basically, I grew up in the village during my very early childhood. I grew up in the village. We didn't have running water. We didn't have electricity. But I was lucky enough to see the first high voltage line going through my village. It was a very high voltage. But we had to wait for... I'm not even sure that I saw my village receive the electricity before I left to the city. But later on, we had the transformer to go from the high voltage to the lower voltage that can be used in the house. So, that was my first contact with electricity, the high voltage. But at the time, I don't think that the village was able to... That high voltage was going across the village, but we didn't have the electricity in the village itself. Because the state needed more investment to have a transformer to bring down the high voltage to the voltage that can be used in the house. So, that took another maybe five years. I don't remember exactly.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. So, in terms of transportation, agriculture, things like that, how were those done? How were those achieved?

[Felix Pene]

About transportation, we had cars. And those cars were fueled by gas, the normal gas we use here in the United States. And yeah, we used cars just to go from city to city. The city was far away. But for most commutes, we had to go by foot. Because we didn't have many people having cars, you know. So, yeah, most of the time we had to go by foot.

[Astrid Pene]

And agriculture, food?

[Felix Pene]

The agricultural side wasn't industrial agriculture. We really used the basic, very basic tools. Like machetes. And I don't know how you call the hoe. To cultivate the fields. There was a hoe and a machete. We used to chop manually. Okay? Generally, the men chopped down the forest. And the women came to work with their hoes. To cultivate, you know. There were the fields. The product that the fathers sold was coffee. In the west, in the region where I grew up. My father and practically all the fathers cultivated coffee. It was the product that gave money. And that had the possibility of being cultivated in the climate of the West. The climate of the West was not suitable for cocoa, for example. There was only coffee that was adapted. So everyone, practically, that's what the fathers cultivated, coffee. So it was the industrial product that the fathers sold to send their children to school. Well, the mothers on their side, they managed to cultivate potatoes, plantains, taro. All these products, peppers, everything you can imagine. To sell and make their own pocket money. Because the mothers didn't always wait for the fathers to help them out. So that's how life was organized in the village.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. And I remember, when I was young, we would go to the well and draw the water to take home.

[Felix Pene]

That was not in the village. That was actually in the city of Douala. Usually, in the city, we already have electricity. That was a long time ago. It's not my childhood. Now we're talking about your childhood. So your time, when you came to this world, by that time we had electricity. We had running water, sometimes. Because it was not permanent. So during the time that we didn't have running water in the house, we had to go to the well or to the river to fetch water.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. And how was that energy transition from the village to the city? What did you see change in your everyday life regarding energy?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah. I can't really pinpoint the big change. Now that I'm thinking about it, it was a big change. Definitely. Because in the city, you have public lightning. You know, the street.

[Astrid Pene]

Lighting?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah. So the street has lights and you have a light in the house. So that is... Now that I'm thinking about it, in the village, if you have to go somewhere during the night, either you have a flashlight or you have the... I don't know how you call it. The lamp that uses kerosene.

[Astrid Pene]
Kerosene lamp?

[Felix Pene]
Yeah. So that's the big difference. In the village, the only time you can see during the night is when you have the moon. You know? Yeah. But if there is no moon, that's it. Everything is really dark.

[Astrid Pene]
Yeah. Okay. And then you mentioned that there wasn't always running water, even in the city. What was that intermittency, that inconsistency of water? Did they have it with electricity as well?

[Felix Pene]
It was very annoying, of course. It was very annoying because you had to go draw water. Okay? And given the population of the city, it's not like in the village where there was a low population. In the city, there is a high concentration of people, which means that to draw water, you had to line up around the well or even line up at the river, depending on where you were going to get water. And it could take an hour or more. So that was very uncomfortable.

[Astrid Pene]
And electricity? Did it happen with it as well?

[Felix Pene]
During that time, it was rare. The power cuts were really rare. Now, after a year, because they didn't upgrade the infrastructure. Yeah, you can have the electricity... I don't know how, there were power cuts for practically a week. You didn't have electricity. So that's exactly what people are dealing with now. And the running water, we don't even think about it. Because now in the city, in the large city, many people, those who have the money, they just have their own well in the property. So they can have water. Individual wells. Mechanical wells, because they have a tank and then very deep with a pump in the bottom of the well. So the pump is going to pump water in the tank and then they can use it in the house.

[Astrid Pene]
And then, do you know if the pump was steam? Or do you know where the electricity came from?

[Felix Pene]
For the...

[Astrid Pene]
For the pumps and also for the houses.

[Felix Pene]

No, we, yeah, that is... We have the hydraulic dam. We had a hydraulic dam, hydroelectric. That's how you call it.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay, hydroelectric.

[Felix Pene]

Yeah, yeah. So from the city where the dam, the largest dam was, it's Edéa. That's where the electricity came to supply the whole south. In the north, there was the other dam there. I don't remember the name, but...

So... the Song Lou Lou. Practically... Yeah. We had the Song Loulou. Song Loulou was in the north and Edéa in the south. So we had two dams. One in the north, one in the south.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. That's really cool. And then, how did... You went to France. Tell me about that. In terms of the energy that you saw, the availability.

[Felix Pene]

Yeah. This is... Yeah. The difference I can trace between Cameroon and France is that... In France, you have... Yeah. I was in Paris. I went to school in Paris. So that is one of the big capital cities in Europe. Okay. So I can think that is the highest standard. Okay. So we have electricity. We have running water. We have... For the first time, I was in the tramway. That is the type of bus that is powered by electricity. And... Yeah. The train. Yeah. Some of the train, like this Metra over here. I think in France, even that type of train is powered by the electricity. They call it Metro in Paris. The Metro. Some line of Metro actually still use gasoline to power. Some of the more modern ones use electricity to power the ramp.

So the first experience, that was not an enjoyable one. I was in school. And there was an outage. The siren, the alarm went off. But we got stuck in the room because everything was powered by the electricity. We couldn't open the door. And that is the bad side of it.

So for the first time, I realized that relying only on power, like electricity, is not always, is not 100% a good thing. Because when you rely exclusively on something, we got stuck in the classroom. And with all the alarm going on, it was kind of very annoying. So that is the one thing I remember about Paris compared to the... But besides that day, I never experienced any other outage during my time in Paris as a student.

[Astrid Pene]

Wow. And do you know, it's okay if you don't, but do you know what types, where the electricity in Paris was coming from, by any chance?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah, they have multiple sources of energy. First of all, they have a nuclear, central nuclear. And they have a dam.

[Astrid Pene]

And this is when you were a student there?

[Felix Pene]

No, in Paris, I can't tell you exactly where... I know this because of my background as a journalist. But I can't tell you that Paris was powered by the nuclear energy, or the dam, the energy from the dam, or the gas, you know. So I didn't search, I didn't search that one.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay, that's okay. I just wanted to know if like, while you were there, if you knew where the electricity was coming from, but it's okay.

[Felix Pene]

The company that is the provider, the main provider, I think is actually the only one provider of electricity in France, is called EDF, Électricité de France. So yeah, it's called EDF. But that's all I knew about it, because like I said, it's my background. I need to know, you know, even though I didn't have to research any subject related to the source of energy. But I can tell you that the company that was in charge to provide electricity in France is EDF, Électricité de France.

[Astrid Pene]

Wow. And then now, you obviously live in the United States, and energy, electricity has, you know, developed a lot. How would you compare the energy technologies of today to when you were younger?

[Felix Pene]

The main revolution we have, now we have a car, electric car. Before the electric car, we have hybrid car.

[Astrid Pene]

You own a hybrid car, right?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah. Also, we have solar panels.

[Astrid Pene]

And this is in the house?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah, no, I'm talking about me now. If you look outside, people have many sources of energy. From the wind.

The wind, how do you call it?

[Astrid Pene]

Wind turbine?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah. I know not far from here, there is a city called, I think it's Aurora, I'm not sure, but they have a wind farm over there. That's the first thing I learned when I was doing my ESL classes. Yeah, there is a wind farm over there. And they call it, I don't know, the Lightning

City or something like that. I'm not sure, but I need to research. Since they call Chicago Windy City, that city, because of the wind farm, they gave it a name that is related to the source of energy, something like that.

[Astrid Pene]

And yeah, you said you have solar panels and a hybrid car. What made you decide to buy these products?

[Felix Pene]

Two reasons, two main reasons. The first reason is economic. With the hybrid car, my commute is one hour, one way. So to go and come back from work, that is two hours driving. And I also noticed that the number one budget, the high expense on my budget was the gas consumption. So I had to make that decision to save some money on gas.

But the second reason was strategic and environmental. Because I rely on scientists when they say that there is a global warming due to fossil fuels. So if we can help in any way, and try to keep the planet Earth as safer for the next generation, why not?

So that was the second reason for that decision. So I use a solar panel because I think in the long run, we will not rely on nuclear energy or other type of energy like fossil fuel. And so, yeah, that was the second reason, to preserve the environment.

[Astrid Pene]

And would you say that these values regarding the environment are common among your community or not so much? What do you think the general consensus is regarding global warming and the environment?

[Felix Pene]

It's mixed. Because some people don't trust science, also because politics get involved. And for those reasons, some people are really skeptical about global warming. Some people think that it is a hoax. So within my community, I don't think people are really involved in the day-to-day politics. So they might not be even aware of those positions.

So I think within the community, I think the main reason is that they don't have the information. That's it. Because I think the clean energy has many, many positive aspects. Okay. And yeah, I think for most people, it's a lack of information, of good information.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. And would you say that trust has anything to do with that? I'm not trying to put words in your mouth.

[Felix Pene]

That's exactly what I'm saying. If people say that global warming is a hoax, that means they don't trust the scientists, right? They don't trust the scientists. So if you trust the scientists, you're going to act on it, okay? On what they say. But if there is no trust, you won't care. You won't budge, right? So, yeah.

[Astrid Pene]

And what do you think is affecting that lack of trust in scientists or in the information that you're getting?

[Felix Pene]

I said it earlier. I said it's politics. You know, actually, you know, fossil fuel company, they don't want to, you know, go bankrupt. Because if everyone, many people move to the clean energy, definitely they're going to go bankrupt. So, and like everybody knows, those companies are really, really rich and powerful. So they use lobbies and they pay politicians. And they can sometimes even pay fake scientists to go against real scientists. So sometimes people are just confused, you know? Because they have two sides of the story and they don't have enough tools to decide, to make a good decision. So that is the situation.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. And then going back to your time growing up in Cameroon, how did you, I mean, were there any changes in like local traditions or ways of life or any cultural shifts that happened as a result of any energy transitions?

[Felix Pene]

Probably. That is something that is obvious because if you use a flashlight in your house or you use the lamp in your house and suddenly you have electricity, that's going to really impact your way of life, you know? Because when you have a lamp in the house, it's like... Before people have only one TV in the house and one remote control. And then people are going to be fighting for the remote control, okay? It was the same situation with the lamp. There's only one lamp and I want to go to my room to pick something.

Somebody want to go to the bathroom and the bathroom is actually outside in the bushes, you know? So yeah, that was the situation. And now that anyone who can just put a lamp outside, you know, a light bulb outside in the room and everywhere, it makes life very easy.

[Astrid Pene]

Nice.

[Felix Pene]

But in the tradition sides, I don't see many impact because the tradition... Maybe during the story time because in the village we used to have a story time during the night. And we burn wood logs, you know, and kids is going to sit around the person who is telling the story, the storyteller. And that's how the thing, that is a tradition, you know?

But from what I remember we didn't have public... only people who have money were able to afford to have electricity in their house. I think even now, at this moment when I'm talking, you still have some houses in the village that doesn't have electricity. So that's why we didn't have, because even if you have public lights, somebody have to pay for that. And I don't think the village is rich enough to afford public, you know, lighting.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. That makes sense. And then, last question, are there any old methods of energy production or usage that you think are better or more effective than they are today?

[Felix Pene]

I don't see any because, you know, burning log woods, I think there have been some scholars that studied the burning of log wood that produce a lot of CO₂, and that is not good for the environment. So, yeah, I think that aspect of the situation I don't think is actually good for the environment on the traditional side of things.

[Astrid Pene]

Okay. And then, actual last question, is there anything that you thought about during the course of this interview or that came to mind that you wanted to talk about before we end?

[Felix Pene]

Yeah, actually I have a hybrid car, it's not a plug-in, it's a hybrid, autonomous hybrid that still uses gas, and the battery is very low, the level of battery- the energy in the battery is very low, so I'm still in the transition. My goal is to have a 100% electric car but the technology is not there yet because we don't have enough charging stations and the charging time is still very high. Five hours to charge a car, that is time to go somewhere and come back home. So it's not very efficient at this time, and hopefully, the new technology, we still have improvement, so hopefully down the road we're going to have a car that can go one-thousand miles in one charge.

[Astrid Pene]

Wow, yeah, that would be cool. Okay, thank you so much for meeting with me and letting me conduct this interview.