

Olufunmilola Obielodan
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HIST 17522
Oral History Transcript

LOLA: Hi, my name is Lola. I'll be interviewing my dad today for the oral history project. So daddy, our goals for this project are to document the everyday experience of using and producing energy as it has changed over the 20th and 21st centuries. We also want to build up student skills in carrying out interview-based research and to teach students like myself about energy and its recent history.

I just wanted to get your consent again that this will be recorded and transcribed and written about. You can have confidentiality, so please feel free to use pseudonyms. Is that okay?

JAMES: That is fine.

LOLA: Thank you. No special knowledge of history or energy is necessary. I'm just interested in hearing about your experiences and like the changes you've seen over your lifetime in energy use.

JAMES: Okay.

LOLA: This should take about an hour max, so is that okay?

JAMES: That's fine.

LOLA: Alright! So let's get started. My first question is pretty easy. Can you just tell me a bit about yourself and like your history I guess?

JAMES: I'm originally from Nigeria and came to the United States, and I schooled at Wheaton College, which is 25 miles northwest of Chicago. And from there I went to Baylor University. Then I went to Michigan State University, where I worked for about 13, 14 years as the manager of the Faculty Facility for Creative Computing.

Upon completing my doctoral degree program, I came to Kentucky State University, and I have been teaching here since 2001. So my experiences can be considered to be international as well as global, in a sense. Most of my life have been in education and therefore my perspective in life would be conditioned primarily by experiences in educational institutions.

I'm a Christian, and I believe that my life has to be pleasing to the Lord. Otherwise, it would have been a waste of...it would have not been worth it. Therefore, I try to conduct myself in ways that are pleasing to the Lord, to love the Lord my God, and to love my fellow human being.

You said your class is human civilization. I owe it to human civilization to be civil, to be legal in all I do, to make sure that I do what is right and avoid what is wrong, and leave legacies that

future generations will benefit from. So I need to be sustainable in the way that I live my life. So that's a brief introduction.

I'm married to a very smart wife who is also a doctor. She's smarter than I am, and I'm happy for that, or with that. And of course, you are our daughter, and we thank God for you because you are smart, you are beautiful, and you respect people, you love the Lord too, and your brother is equally very smart and love the Lord. And our desire for both of you is that you'll be great in what you do.

And so that's my brief introduction.

LOLA: Well, thank you for that...

JAMES: You're welcome.

LOLA: ...brief introduction. So yeah, you said that you grew up in Nigeria and you were born and raised there, I'm assuming...

JAMES: Yes. Since you were not there when I was born, yes. I was born in Nigeria. I was raised there. The first 20-something years of my life was in Nigeria.

LOLA: Okay... so tell me about how it was like growing up in Nigeria. Like what did you do? How did you live life?

JAMES: Well, my father was a farmer, a merchant, a tailor. He was an entrepreneur.

LOLA: Oh, wow. I didn't know all that.

JAMES: Yeah. After he came back from, I believe the second World War on the side of the British Empire.

So when he returned from the World War, he settled in our village and so had extensive farm¹. Actually they gave him a nickname, "a young man with a lot of money." Which explained the meaning of my middle name... Uh, I'm not sure what happened, I guess when I got to the family, the money vanished.

So...But he was a very successful merchant until he succumbed to an illness that at the time. Because he was in an area and a time when medical technology was primitive, they could not conduct a proper diagnosis.

In my own judgment, maybe there was something he may have contracted from the war, maybe some kind of... well anyway, that may have affected him that [he] eventually succumb to.

¹ I later went back and asked James about the uses of farms in Nigeria. He said that farming was the main trade for most at the time, and that it was mainly used to feed the family.

My mom raised the children. She worked 'round the clock, usually from around 5:00 AM till around 8:00 PM. She was extremely hardworking - industrious. She loved her kids. She would do everything and anything possible within the law to take care of her children.

She lived to be 90 and passed away a few years ago. So, my siblings and myself owe a lot of gratitude to her because my father passed away when I was probably about nine years of age.

But I was extremely lucky to have an uncle and an aunt who raised me and treated me exactly [how] they would have treated a son if they had a son. They sponsor me in school, and they were very, very nice to me. I'm eternally grateful to them.

So from there, I did high school in Nigeria and did my first bachelor's degree in theology with concentration in... of course theology and minors in history and communication. I taught high school for about four years with my first degree before coming to the United States.

So in a nutshell, that's my brief history in Nigeria.

LOLA: Okay, thank you. Going back to your father, before you moved in with your uncle, did you have any experience like working on the farm or working with him or do you remember any of that time?

JAMES: Yes, I have a very little experience. Of course most kids did not like going to farm because I was very young. But we were required to, and if you try not to he will give you enough assignment at home that you wish you had gone to farm in the first place. [laughs] You can't escape work. He was very hardworking, he was industrious, and so he expected all his kids to work.

So yes, I did go to farm. Of course I couldn't do as much as adults, but we would go to farm, especially during holidays, maybe around 5:00 AM or something like that after morning prayer in the local church. He always went to morning prayer meeting that started maybe around 4:30 and by 5:30, the prayer will be over, and then we will go to farm. Again, if it's during the holidays, we will come back late in the evening, maybe around 7:00 PM or so, and then start the routine again the following day.

LOLA: So would you say that your early childhood was like a lot of physical labor...you would say?

JAMES: Well, yes, but it's what people who live in agrarian society...that's what they expect, everybody to have hands on deck. Children have their own role. You'll not work as hard as adults, but you are expected to do some things.

You know, go and bring this; or take this to that place, to that person; or bring something from that person and so on. So we all have our chores and errands and tasks to perform.

As I said, most kids don't want to go to farm, but it's required. Even here in the United States, from all I have been able to gather, if you grow up on a farm, you are expected to do farm work, whether you are young or old.

LOLA: Thank you for that history of your early childhood. Um, I'm guessing it was like around nine years old that you moved in with your uncle?

JAMES: Sorry, what's your question again?

LOLA: Was it around nine years old when your father passed away?

JAMES: Yes. I started living with an uncle of mine when I was about nine years of age. Like between six and nine days after my dad passed away. He [James's uncle] took me to another city where he was living, and I lived with him and did my elementary school education under his guidance and parental leading or leadership.

LOLA: And how was that? Was it like pretty different from like the labor work that you did with your dad or was it still...

JAMES: Well, yeah, it's different because that was more or less like a city life. There was no going to farm...at least at the beginning. He eventually had a farm, but did not subject me to doing anything rigorous or strenuous.

But as I said, he was very kind and compassionate to me. He was very loving. Now, when discipline was required, he disciplined me, but I knew that I deserved to be disciplined those few times.

I have always been a very nice kid, or I was always a very nice kid. Of course, no kid is perfect, but he had very little to discipline me for. But when he needed to correct me, he corrected me in love and made sure that I succeeded in my education...even though he himself had very little education. I think he had the equivalence of maybe grade four education. So not a whole lot.

LOLA: Okay. Do you mind telling me like what time period this was? Like what year?

JAMES: Oh my goodness. You trying to put carbon dating...?

LOLA: [laughs] I know...

JAMES: You trying to put carbon dating...?

Well, I started living with him in 1963 up till 1968, I believe. And then I went back to close to my village, or to our village, to a secondary school.

So I lived with him and his wife for about six, seven years and then, he sent me for secondary education - that's a high school education - in another place. It's unlike here, you had to write what we call entrance examination, and you have to go for interview to be accepted.

Schools were very difficult to get into at that time, so the selection process required that you write an exam. You go for an interview, and you may have probably up to 500 kids interviewing for a spot that will probably be around 30 kids that will be selected. So it was highly competitive.

LOLA: Oh wow. So was it a boarding school?

JAMES: At the time I went, it wasn't a boarding school, it was a day school. However, .except for the kids who grew up in that particular village and had their relatives there, those of us that came from other parts of the country were renting rooms from local people. And then we'll go to school from there.

So we'll go to school around 7:00 AM, and we'll not be back finally until around nine o'clock.

LOLA: Okay... so how was it like living with the, like people in the village? How was life there?

JAMES: I think the village people were very nice to us, to the kids in that school.

It was a thing of pride for the community to have a secondary school that kids from other communities were coming to. So generally they were very nice to us.

The family I stayed with - actually, she was a widow. Her husband had been a pastor with the denomination that I grew up in, but passed away.

So she had, oh, probably about four extra rooms that she allow kids from other communities to stay. To be honest, I don't remember whether we paid anything or not, but she was very nice to us.

It was very, very difficult for most kids because that particular community did not have running water, you know, tap water.

LOLA: Mm-hmm.

JAMES: So we would have to go and fetch water from up the mountain. There's a very small spring where we fetch water from, particularly during the dry season. Now, during the rainy season, [she] had a well, and we could draw water from the well.

But during the dry season, the well usually would dry up. So the little water in the well, she used it for herself. And I don't blame her because she was an old lady. She had no house help, and she could not afford to allow, you know, those of us who were there as guests, to use her water, the little water she had in the well.

So we will climb the hill at night to go and fetch water. I'm talking now anywhere between 12 midnight and 2:00 AM or 3:00 AM.

LOLA: Wow.

JAMES: It was very difficult because that particular town is known to have a lot of snakes. So we had to tiptoe and be very careful not to step on anything that would, uh, do us damage [laughs] If you understand what I'm saying.

LOLA: Yes [laughs]

JAMES: So it was very, very difficult. I'm glad you don't have to go through that.

LOLA: Yeah...

JAMES: And I'm glad most Americans, I won't say all, but I'm glad that most Americans do not have to go through that kind of difficult life.

LOLA: Yeah [inaudible mumble]. Two quick questions, or I guess one quick question.

You mentioned the word House Help, and I was wondering if you could define that. Cause I know what it means, but I don't know if everyone like...

JAMES: Well, back in Nigeria, and even up to now, families do hire people to help with house chores. Like, help in the kitchen, help with washing dishes and clothes. At times, clean the house and if there are little children, help take care of the children.

At least at the time I was growing up, we did not have washing machine. We did not have drying machine. So a lot of things were done by hand. So washing clothes was by hand.

Cooking. We did not have electric cooker or even gas cooker, so we had to use what we call firewood. You go into the bush, cut down trees to be able to - or buy, you know, cut down trees, to be able to get energy to cook and do other things.

So, a lot of homes could not take care of everything at the same time, so they probably will hire somebody to help with some of the house chores. So they were called House Helps.

LOLA: And by hire... From what I know, I assume most of them were getting paid in like food and room and board, right?

JAMES: Yes. Most of them would have- would live with those families that hire them. They will eat there, of course they will sleep there, and then they will be paid some fees.

Very, very minimal - minimum wage by the standard over there. The minimum wage there may not be commensurate with the minimum wage here - that's proportionately - but those House Help, for many of them that's how they're able to survive because some of them would, even from the little amount they are paid, be able to support their family, like their mom or dad who may be living somewhere else, maybe in the village.

And that's the reality of life for a long period of time. Things may be changing now, but there are still House Helps because the facilities, the amenities to have comfortable living is not as well established as what we have here in the United States.

LOLA: Thank you.

JAMES: You're welcome

LOLA: So your life. This was about...secondary school, so about high school. You've gone from living with your dad - you guys lived in the village before you moved?

JAMES: Yes. Mm-hmm. We lived in the village. It's now a city - at least a small-sized city - for a place like Nigeria, but it was a village at the time.

LOLA: Okay. So you went from living in the village, to living in the city with your uncle, to moving back to the village, and all of those experiences were pretty different.

It's very interesting. I haven't heard actually a lot of these stories. I thought you lived with your uncle until you came to America, so that was interesting to hear actually...

JAMES: Well, I can tell you more during the holidays.

LOLA: Yes, I will be excited to hear it...

JAMES: And talking about different experience- or experiences, yes. Living with my mother was quite different. As I told you - I mean I lived with her, my dad, until he passed away, and I left the village about six, nine days after he passed away - it is the other kids who actually grew up with her and who knew her more than I did.

But I knew enough to know...or I know enough to know that she worked very hard. I mean, for somebody who wake up around 4:30, 5 o'clock, and would not come back home until around 8:00 PM, doing very hard labor, menial job just to make ends meet and to provide for her children.

It was very, very difficult for her. For which...she's larger than life. She did not have money. She had no former education, never studied in any...I mean, she couldn't even write her own name, but she worked hard. And I have the greatest respect for her because she worked very, very hard.

So the experience that other kids, other children that she had, their experiences are quite different from mine because in my own case, I was extremely fortunate to live with somebody who did not have to go through the difficulties that the other kids went through. And as I said, they [James's aunt and uncle] loved me. They took care of me, and I'm very, very grateful to them for that.

Now, when I went to secondary school, it was a different thing. If he [James's uncle] had money, he would have supported me more, but he was like a minimum wage worker. He had his own children and the family to take care of.

So even though he was able to pay what we call tuition - cause you had to pay tuition at that time - other fees, like money to buy food and buy clothing and so on, he just couldn't afford them. Not because he did not want to, but he had no money.

So my mother was responsible for my feeding and that of my older brother, and it was not easy. It was very, very difficult for her to meet that need. But again, I thank God that we passed through that stage, and I would say that, at least in my own case, I thank God that I'm a successful person today.

LOLA: Yes. Amen. So you finished secondary school and - very quick, I'm just gonna go through this very quickly - you go to seminary and then you teach for four years.

JAMES: Correct.

LOLA: So where did you go to seminary? Where did you teach? How was that like?

JAMES: I went to what we call Igbaja Theological Seminary. It was a seminary that was established by my denomination called ECWA. At that time it was called Evangelical Churches of West Africa that was founded by Sudan Interior Mission.

Today it's called Evangelical Churches Winning All. So instead of Evangelical Churches of West Africa, it's now Evangelical Churches Winning All, but the parent establishing organization is called Sudan Interior Mission with headquarters in... is it North or South Carolina here in the US.

So the seminary is a four year post-secondary education. So I got a bachelor of theology degree from there. And with that degree, I taught religious knowledge at a school in the same town where I went to seminary. It was an ECWA secondary school.

And so I taught for four years. I actually taught religious knowledge. There was even a time I taught economics, I think for one term. Cause we're running quarter system at the time.

LOLA: Mm-hmm.

JAMES: And I taught, English language for I think a year. I think there was another course that I taught for a year, but for the most part it was Bible knowledge that I taught.

I was also the chaplain of the secondary school. I lived on campus because teachers had housing on campus. So as the chaplain and the senior Bible knowledge teacher, I had house on campus. So I was able to interact with a lot of students. And I'm very grateful that many of the students, or some of the students I should say, are very successful professionals today.

LOLA: Wow, that's amazing. Okay, so I know, and you said before that after you taught for four years, you came to America.

JAMES: Mm-hmm.

LOLA: So how was the transition from Nigeria to America? What was like some big differences, if any, that you saw immediately?

JAMES: Well, just imagine that I never saw snow in my life.

LOLA: [Laughs]

JAMES: I heard about it, but had no idea... Bear in mind, I lived in a place where we did not have refrigerator, so I never touched ice. So I had no knowledge of what snow is and came in February to Chicago - because I went to Wheaton College, which is 25 miles northwest of Chicago - woke up the following morning and saw the whole place white - you know, the fields and so on.

And I said, "Oh, so this must be what they call snow." Of course, it was kind of bright and sunny...

LOLA: Uh-oh.

JAMES: And so I just wore something casual. Uh...I think I still remember that experience till today, even though that was back in 1981. I almost froze to death because it was very, very cold. That gives me the experience to respect nature and not to fool with nature.

LOLA: Yes.

JAMES: So, so that's one big... That's one major difference. And then I went to cafeteria, and I mean the food was great, but some, but some of the students were, "Ah, I don't like this..."

And I said, "What's wrong with these kids? You have such good food and you are complaining and whining." I guess it was because...[trails off]. I mean I enjoyed the food at Wheaton College.

By the way, it's a great institution. No institution is perfect, but it's great.

Now, a lot of things, or some things threw me off: the use of slangs. I went to class and they were using slang. The teachers would teach and use slangs and metaphor that I had never heard, didn't understand and, you know, kids in the class would giggle and smile and had fun, and I was trying to figure out the meaning of those slangs.

So it was a little bit challenging for me at least the first - at that time they were running quarter system- the first two quarter system it was a little bit challenging for me because a lot of slangs were used that I was not familiar with.

LOLA: Hmm. Do you have an example? It's okay if you don't, I was just curious.

JAMES: Well, you know, college kids will be college kids. I think some of the ones that I remember it's better I do not repeat them because they were insulting type of metaphors and so on.

So, no, I don't remember specific, and I'm being honest with that, but I remember that there was a particular slang they used in describing some group of student that I did not like, and so I did not pursue that avenue of trying to understand what the slangs meant.

LOLA: Okay, well that's fine. Going back to the cafeteria food, like how is that different from... So you experienced college in Nigeria and in America at this point, and so compared to when you were in ECWA Seminary. Could you like explain the difference between how the cafeteria food worked or was there a cafeteria in seminary?

JAMES: Yes. We had cafeteria and the food there, I'm not sure I can compare them with the food here in cafeteria here because they use local food stuff and local ingredients to prepare the food. And so it's difficult to compare the differences. The kind of food we ate were local.

LOLA: In Nigeria?

JAMES: Yeah, in Nigeria at the seminary. I mean, we had rice, we had beans, but we also ate things - food that I'm sure you would remember. We ate amala, we ate eba, we ate pounded yam [these are traditional Nigerian and West-African foods]. So just staple foods that were local were mostly what we ate.

The missionaries who ran the school did everything they could, but they cannot give us what they don't have. So at times we may not necessarily enjoy the menu that we were provided, but that was the best they could offer, and we were grateful for that.

Of course, in the United States you have FDA. You have rules, regulations. The quality of the food has to comply with certain standard and so on. So, I'm not sure it's possible to make that comparison, fairly.

LOLA: Yeah. Okay. Well that was a good enough comparison for me. I thought it was really great so.

JAMES: Well thank you.

LOLA: So how was like dorm life? How was it in Wheaton?

JAMES: Dorm what?

LOLA: Dorm life. Did you stay in the dorms when you came?

JAMES: Oh, dorm life! Yes I did. Actually, I was in an apartment. I was in the university apartment. I usually don't want to talk about that on record because I went through culture shock with the roommate I had.

LOLA: Okay, that's fine. So I think we're gonna move on to... Where did you go next?

JAMES: Well, when I left Wheaton College and graduate school, I went to Baylor University in 1984, because that was the only place where I had sponsorship readily available after Wheaton College. And there I did some graduate study program for one and a half years - I did not complete the degree - and then moved to Michigan State University in '85.

LOLA: Okay, cool. Can I ask you what degree you got at Wheaton?

JAMES: At Wheaton College? I got a Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communication, and my concentration was radio, television, film production.

LOLA: Oh, wait, can we talk about that? I know in Nigeria they have like radios and stuff, but how often did you work with- or I guess, what kind of equipment did you work with in Wheaton and how often did you work with that in Nigeria, if you worked with it at all in Nigeria?

JAMES: I did not work with radio, television and film production in Nigeria. The communication I had was mostly creative writing.

LOLA: In Nigeria?

JAMES: Yeah, in Nigeria.

Now, I did do student work at a radio station we call Radio ELWA [Eternal Love Winning Africa]. It was a radio station established by SIM, Sudan Interior Mission, and ECWA, but I did not do any broadcasting. I was replying to letters sent to make inquiry and ask questions about the Bible, about life and so on.

So I was working in the counseling department of Radio ELWA as a student while I was at the seminary. That's the extent to which I had anything to do with radio.

So I knew the studio, but I did not work in the studio. I was in the counseling department. Now at Wheaton College, as a communications student, we were required - I mean with radio, television, film production - we were required to have internship experience. And as an international student at the time...

FM 88... uh, WETN, FM 88. That was the Wheaton College radio station at the time. It's my understanding that the radio station is no longer there. But at that time, I operated the equipment, and also particularly during winter vacation when nobody was around, you know, whosoever wants to run the system was allowed to do that. As long as you don't do anything that would cause problem for the college.

LOLA: Mm-hmm.

JAMES: And I did a very nice job, I believe. I was the producer of International Spotlight for FM 88. So an international student will be selected to produce a program for a whole year, on behalf of international student. So the following year, another international student will be selected to run the show.

So in '82, I was the one who produced the International Spotlight. And the approach I took was to look at the profile of different countries around the world in terms of how Christians and Christian churches fare in those countries.

It was at the height of Apartheid in South Africa. And I remember one of the programs I produced on South Africa. I don't remember the whole thing, but the last statement in the broadcast was, "It may be that when we get to heaven, there's going to be Johannesburg on one side and Soweto on the other side, and God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will have to be in the in between to reconcile the differences."

And then I said, "I know that's heresy, but we are not living to the calling that we as children of God are asked to, and so we are not representing what life will be in heaven, and it's a shame on us as Christians."

I think based on the feedback that the studio manager, Professor Stuart Johnson - I still remember his name - it was probably the program that brought him the greatest number of call from the community, thanking the college for allowing me to air that perspective because they never heard it, and they never made any connection between how race relation affect even how we behave in the church.

So I was glad that I had that feedback.

LOLA: Oh, that's good.

JAMES: Now for television, we had a very small TV station on campus. I would not call it industrial strength. It was just a very small studio where we had busy camera editing facility and so on.

But for the advanced television production class that I took - it was on Wacker Drive in Chicago. There was a Christian television studio on Wacker Drive at that time. I'm sorry, I don't remember the name of that studio, and they have professional, industry standard equipment. And so that's where we did our advanced television production class.

LOLA: Mm, okay. This was like mid-eighties?

JAMES: Yes. That was in '82, I believe. Right? '81/'82.

LOLA: Okay. So we're gonna take like a quick pause and compare the sixties - when you were growing up - to the eighties. And I know you were in two different places, but... Well actually, did you go back to visit at any point, to Nigeria in the eighties?

JAMES: No, I came in '81 and I could not go back until '92, because I just couldn't afford it. I did not have the money. It was very difficult, especially for my mom back at home. I understand she cried a lot, even though she had other great kids around her. For some reason, I think she loved me, even though I did not like live with her like the other kids, but it's an open secret that she loved me dearly. And I just couldn't go back, not because I didn't want to, but I didn't have the money. I could not afford it.

LOLA: Okay. Well I know you wanted to, but you know, you were able to go back in the nineties, so that's good. I guess we should move on to Michigan State. You were there for a really long time.

JAMES: Yes. For a *long* time.

LOLA: A long time. I know a lot of stories about Michigan. So you were there in mid-eighties to, I guess...

JAMES: 2001

LOLA: ...to 2001, right. Because you came to where we'll talk about after, in 2001. But how was that? I mean, it's a pretty big time span of growth and just life to be in Michigan and especially compared to the amounts of time you spent in other places before then.

So, I guess, do you wanna talk about Michigan?

JAMES: Well, I like to talk about things that are positive that I experienced there. I had a lot of challenges, again because at the beginning I did not have the money to be able to easily and quickly pay my tuition, and you know, boarding fee and so on.

So it was rough to start at the beginning, but once I got past the turbulent time because of lack of money, I was - by God's grace - able to make the best of the opportunities I had.

One key thing that helped me a lot was taking advantage of an opportunity that came up, where my professor got a grant to integrate interactive videotape.

Now, when I talk about interactive videotape today, college kids have no understanding what I'm talking about. It's like I'm going to prehistoric moment. But there was a time when we had VHS and betacam and so on, and those were new technology, or at least fairly new at the time, that they were experimenting with how to best use videotape for interactive instruction. It wasn't that there were no videos and so on, but to build interactive instruction on videos, on VHS and betacam and so on, that was new.

So the professor got a grant to buy the machine and the software, but did not have enough grants to pay a graduate assistant to learn the system, and so the professor made it open to anybody who would like to do that.

Well again, at the time I was not an American citizen. I was an international student, and I wanted to absorb as much as possible so when I go back to Nigeria, I could be relevant to the educational institution over there. So even though I had no money, I volunteered to learn the system.

Usually graduate classes ended around 10:00 PM. So I would stay behind to learn the system before, you know, going to work and so on. So I was getting probably just roughly 30 minutes to maximum of two hours [of sleep] a day, several days in a week, weeks and months and so on. I don't recommend it for anyone. But because I was able to make that sacrifice, I learned the system and was even able to write step-by-step instruction on how to use the system.

And as soon as I did that, the computer lab in Michigan State had grant to buy interactive video disc. Now, that's a significant upgrade from videotape [laughs]. I mean, it was a major innovation at that time, and the grant was now used in buying what was referred to as the IBM InfoWindows system.

It was a touchscreen system that would enable you to code and access different video segments and build interactive instruction around that. I was one of the first one to do that on campus. Again, because I had volunteer.

They needed somebody who had experience with interactive video instruction. I was the only one. I mean, there were two of us, but the other person already had a full-time appointment, and even though he was interested, because there was no payment for that, he would not leave his job for that.

LOLA: Mm-hmm.

JAMES: So it was an opportunity to learn new, innovative thing, but sacrifice in the process of doing that. And as soon as I learned that this interactive video disc project came up, and I was recommended for that - to be a graduate assistant for all the medical school to integrate interactive video disk in their instruction. So, college Veterinary medicine, the college of Human Medicine, college of Nursing, college of Osteopathic Medicine, college of Pathology, and so on.

So... well the best project I was able to complete was an interactive video instruction on Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation. It was a simulation of a dog who had cardiac arrest and was rushed to the veterinary medical clinic.

I mean, we actually video tape it and used the videotape to now create instructions so that veterinary medical students would not have to sacrifice any dog to learn how to resuscitate the dog. They will learn all the process in this video.

At the time, I know all the treatments that were required, how you check for pulses and look at the pupils to see if there's dilation. I know everything about external massage, internal massage, internal palpation... [goes on about what he knew about the veterinary medical field]

The only thing is I could not practice because I was not a medical student, but as a technician who did the programming, I knew everything. And it was a great experience for me, and that's how I got into information system to start with.

As a result of that, I became the manager of the Faculty Facility for Creative Computing and did a number of other innovative programs: CD-ROM, Courseware Development, and then from there moved into learning management systems... We call it EWGIE [this acronym might be incorrect, but the full name of the program is MSU Virtual University Widgit], which we developed in-house, and then eventually Blackboard and so on.

So in a nutshell, that was my experience at Michigan State University.

LOLA: Wow. So you've worked on some big names. IBM, Blackboard - which I remember when you told me that I was so like shocked, not like in a bad way, but just like that's so cool.

JAMES: I think the key for me was there was an opportunity that presented itself. It's without pay. I had no money, but I had to sacrifice to make use of the opportunity. And so one thing led to another, of course with a lot of headaches along the way, some of which I may have shared with you but time will not allow us to do that tonight.

But certainly it was a great experience for me learning technology systems and how technology systems can power innovative instruction in different disciplines. From sciences to the medical field, I even did computer assisted instruction on the history of the Hebrews, and made a presentation with the two primary faculty members I work with at the national...uh, NHE...NHE? National Endow something.

I spent a lot of time creating programs, courseware development programs, interactive courseware materials.

LOLA: Wow, that's amazing. So, just to let you flex a little bit...

JAMES: [laughs] Okay...

LOLA: You got your last degree at Michigan state?

JAMES: Correct.

LOLA: Now that we have come to the end of Michigan state, can we list the number of degrees you have and what they are in?

JAMES: Well, my first degree at Michigan State was a masters degree in educational systems development. From there, I got a Phd in educational systems development with emphasis on

computer education, telecommunications, and program evaluation. And then after that I did a masters of business administration. MBA.

LOLA: Wow...And so that makes 6 degrees?

JAMES: Yeah all together, by God's grace, I have two bachelors, three masters degrees, and a Phd. Which explains why I don't have money. I spent all my money on education.

LOLA: Yes, well, we thank God for allowing you to get to there. That is really cool and really amazing. I just wanted to let you flex a little bit because six degrees is no small thing.

JAMES: I was just a few courses away from getting the seventh one.

LOLA: Yeah.

JAMES: But, I think for now I have enough.

LOLA: You're good

JAMES: Thank you

LOLA: [laughs] You mentioned a masters in business and for this next part of your life, which was 2001 until now, you have been teaching correct?

JAMES: Yes, correct. I have been teaching and have also been in administrative positions.

LOLA: Right. So, can we talk a little bit about what happened in 2001? And how has that led to where you are now?

JAMES: In 2001, having completed my Phd and MBA degree. Again, I was working in the lab, and I looked at the prospect of advancing, career wise.

I could not get a teaching appointment because most research institutions want you to go elsewhere instead of staying within the university. If they want to hire new people, they want new blood. Because when you are teaching in the same school "what do you know that you did not get from us? We want somebody with new perspective, fresh perspective."

So the prospect of getting a teaching position was zero. And the prospect of getting a promotion within the lab was almost zero. The reason being that there were people who were there long before me and so they're already in the pipeline for leadership positions. Well, I can not boot them out and overtake them.

So I started looking for opportunity elsewhere, where I could advance career wise. I spoke with a friend - and you know him, he passed away a few years ago - who was aware of an opening in the school business for an assistant professor for management information systems. He brought it

to my attention, I applied and was accepted. So I came in 2001 as an assistant professor in the school of business to establish management information systems program.

LOLA: And where exactly did you go?

JAMES: Kentucky State University.

LOLA: Kentucky!!!

JAMES: Yeah Kentucky. "The Bluegrass Kingdom." So I came to Kentucky State University to establish the management information system program, but, it did not take off very well. For various reasons and situations beyond my control.

Anyway, in 2005 there was a need for a new chair for the school of business, and I was appointed as an interim chair. I did that from 2005 to 2008, and left the position to go back to full time teaching. And then in 2012, I became the director of graduate studies - in some schools they call it Dean of Graduate school, but here we call it the director of graduate studies. I did that for 5 years, and left the position. And then in 2017, I believe, I was appointed again as interim chair of the school of business, and I did that till 2020 or so. Since then I have been teaching full time, no longer in administration.

Between 2005 - when I first became chair - and now, by God's grace, we were able to establish a masters in business administration - thats under my administrative leadership - and then the 5-year MBA program, and have had a couple of initiatives since then.

So it's been a thrilling experience, challenging experiencing, rewarding experience. Wish I could do more, but in a nutshell thats what, by God's grace, we have been able to accomplish. Oh, by the way! When I came in 2001, I decided to visit Nigeria in 2001 and went through Abuja area - Abuja is the new capital - stayed with a cousin and her husband, and saw one paragon of beauty there.

LOLA: Really?

JAMES: Yeah! And one way or the other that paragon of beauty has ended up being your mom.

LOLA: [laughs] Wow!

JAMES: Yeah. So we got married Dec 22, 2001, I believe. And then she had to stay back because it wasnt easy for her to come over immediately. But she came over and in 2003 one exquisitely, beautiful, precious, princess called Lola came as a result of that, and she's the one interviewing me now.

LOLA: [laughs] Correct.

JAMES: So the Lord has blessed me tremendously here in Frankfort, Kentucky. Have there been challenges? Yes there are challenges. There's nowhere you live in this world where you will

not face some challenges, but I can say that the Lord has been good to me. Gave me a wife while here; gave me two lovely, beautiful, smart, children while here; allowed me to administrative experiences, and so I'm thankful to God.

LOLA: Yes, yes... So I wanted to ask about 2001 again. Two things. First of all, going from Michigan to Kentucky, was there a huge difference in living, cooking, I don't know...how things worked? I know Kentucky is very different from Michigan, I'm assuming, actually I've never been to East Lansing so. But do you have anything to say about that?

JAMES: Yeah, well I lived in East Lansing, Michigan, which is the home of Michigan State. Actually, I bought a house in '92 I believe. I had a house there, and of course, my eating pattern and habit was not necessarily the best. I think I have major investment in sister Wendy's and uncle McDonalds for the most part, but yes I did cook for myself.

When I came [to Kentucky] I also cooked for myself somehow here but was guilty of fast food a couple times - to put it mildly - before your mom came along, and of course you know that she's a world class chef. She cooks very great.

So comparing food, there is a major difference in the sense that your Mom has spoiled me, and I'm glad that the Lord used her to spoil me. I'm not complaining. So, my tastebuds are quite different from what it used to be in Michigan.

Now, I had some very nice family friends when I was in Michigan, who one moved away to Minnesota and have since lost touch with them. There's another family that is still there, and they are very dear to me and to us. The husband past away this last year, but the family was exceptionally nice to me for many years before I came down here.

Since coming here, I have some very nice family friends. Of course my best friend passed away, but the wife and the family are still around.

So there are similarities, there are some differences, but one thing I have learned is to adapt and adjust wherever I find myself, because there is no place that is perfect. At times, It's what you make of it. Will there be challenges? Yes. But you try to navigate life and make sense of some of the challenges and the difficulties and make the best of the opportunities that you have.

I dont know if I answered your question, but in terms there are stark differences or not: there are differences, but those differences to me are supposed to be tools and opportunities for me to learn and grow and to learn how to adapt. Its like you're adapting to your natural environment.

LOLA: Right. I wonder, is there any one big difference? Like a cultural shock from Michigan to Kentucky.

JAMES: Well, I have to think because I am not sure. I'm so busy that I just don't have the time to be shocked by anything [laughs]. I found myself so busy that - and I am not trying to deeflect - but in terms of what is a pronounced difference or culture shock...I am not sure. My life is... I am surrounded by... I am defined by my workplace and my church life.

When I came, we had a senior pastor, who was like a father figure and he was very, very nice to us. Even when your mom arrived from Nigeria, he had accompanied me to welcome her at the airport. Before she came, his wife I think wrote a letter, or sent a card to your mom letting her know we were anticipating her to come. They were down to earth. They made us feel welcome and feel at home. Again that was when we first arrived.

I cannot pin point one major cultural shock that would differentiate my experience in Michigan and here. Are there differences? Yeah. But to say a pronounced differences, not that I can think of at the moment.

Well there's one difference, when I was at Michigan State, I had access to almost any system I needed for what I wanted to do, because of the position I had. As I told you, I was the manager of the Faculty Facilities for Creative Computing. But when I came here, the systems were not there - that I was used to. It's not so much lifestyle, but the tools to do what I needed to do. I think that's the major difference.

LOLA: So like differences in technology and stuff, I'm assuming.

JAMES: Difference in technology, access to the adequate technology I need to do what I needed to do. At Michigan state, I had more than what I needed, I had everything, to be honest. I was spoiled.

LOLA: [laughs] Would you call Michigan State city, suburbia...?

JAMES: Well, East Lansing is a university town. The largest employer and organization in East Lansing is Michigan State university. So it's like a city-town. But East Lansing is surrounded by Lansing - which is the state capital - and Okemos, which is like East Lansing but on the other side... so East Lansing is between Okemos and Lansing. So it's part of the Lansing metropolis.

LOLA: So yeah just more city, and Kentucky is more rural, I should say. I mean Frankfort is not like the rural part of Kentucky, but still not as metropolis as Michigan or where you were?

JAMES: Well, to be honest, I did not travel to rural parts of Michigan that much, because I was mostly in East Lansing. 99.99% of time I was in East Lansing, the years that I spent there. Occasionally, I taught part-time at a private college called William Tyndale College on Twelve Mile Road in Detroit. So I would go to Detroit to teach at night and so on, but other than that, my familiarity with Michigan is mostly East Lansing, Lansing, and Okemos. And then some parts of Detroit. So I would not claim to say I know the rural parts of Michigan. There are rural areas, but I just didn't travel a whole lot within Michigan in itself.

LOLA: Okay so thinking back to 2001, you were in three places during then - and we should probably end soon - but, you were in Michigan, you were in Kentucky, and you were in Nigeria for a moment. So thinking about that year, can you compare those three places energy-wise, transportation, culture...Anything that stands out to you in those three different places in that same year.

JAMES: The difference in energy availability and energy used in Kentucky and Michigan are fairly the same, at least in the cities where I lived. You will have electricity 24/7 in East Lansing, Michigan, same thing here in Frankfort, Kentucky. The amenities are there. The hospitals, they function well. The roads are well tarred. And life is relatively easier here [in America] than in Nigeria. When I say life, I am talking about access to amenities, access to what can improve standard of living and so on.

In Nigeria, at least when I visited, electricity did not run 24/7. You could have days without supply of electricity or supply of running water. You may have to find a way to fetch water to use for cooking, for taking bath, and for drinking. The roads - at least the ones that I traveled on - were not well paved or tarred. So there were a lot of pot holes on the street.

But people are glad to see you. Particularly people you know, before I left, they were glad to see me. You could engage in meaningful conversation and so on. So at the personal, social level, you connect better over there [Nigeria] than here [US].

And I think the reason is because, here people are always on the go, there's always work to do. People are doing two, three, four jobs, or even with one job you are on task most of the time. So discretionary time to sit around and enjoy friendly conversation is limited here - in my own experience, I'm not saying that's everybody experience, but in my own experience it's limited. Over there life is a little bit more laid back, but it comes with a lot of challenges.

One other major difference is security. Here you could, if you are in trouble, you can call 911 and get law enforcement to help. In my own experience when I was there, it was not something that was available.

So each place has its own strength and weaknesses, it's own challenges and blessings. For me though, being able to adapt and enjoy where I am is the most important thing. Home is where you feel at home.

LOLA: Yeah... Thank you, I really appreciate it. So, we're getting to the end. I wanted to ask you one random question that we didn't actually get to when we were talking about when you grew up in Nigeria. But in 1977, there was a festival of art and culture that was held in Nigeria. Did you hear anything about that or remember anything about that?

JAMES: Yes, I heard about it, and I preached against it.

LOLA: Oh really?

JAMES: Yes, I preached against it. It was called FESTAC.

LOLA: Yes, it was called FESTAC.

JAMES: Yeah, I preached against it because it was a colossal waste of national money. It wasn't that the idea of festivals was necessarily bad, but Nigerian spent, I believe billions of dollars, that

we have been the source of corruption for so many people. You know, embezzlement of money. They bought big buses that were supposed to serve states and so on and so forth, and some of them just collapsed just a few years after the FESTAC. So it was just a waste of the resources for the country. It was a project and task that was inappropriate for that time.

LOLA: I see.

JAMES: As I saw it at the time.

LOLA: Well, yeah I just wanted to ask you about it because we talked about it in class and as someone who wasn't born or there, I just wanted to hear what someone who was there had to say about it. So, that's very interesting.

JAMES: It was a [inaudible word] to promote African culture, African tradition, African values and the success of black race in art, culture, and humanities, but the money spent - too much money was devoted to it, and I believe a lot of the money was embezzled.

LOLA: I was wondering was that the general feeling of the general population at the time or just...?

JAMES: The general population at the time - most were elated that Nigeria had arrived. There was oil, a lot of revenue were generated from oil money and Nigeria wanted to pride... [audio cut out]

LOLA: Hello?...Okay, so it cut out for a couple of seconds, but we are back. We were talking about people talking about oil, and "Nigeria had arrived", and the general population's feeling about FESTAC in '77.

JAMES: People celebrated FESTAC. I think the majority of Nigerians looked forward to it, and applauded, celebrated the event. But for me at the time it was a colossal waste of money. And the money allocated for it was not properly spent. And if you look carefully, Nigerian wealth started depleting rapidly thereafter.

LOLA: Wow I see.

JAMES: I'm not saying that the depletion was tied to that, but from that event, you see that a lot of Nigerian wealth started depleting exponentially.

LOLA: Oh wow. Well thank you for your perspective on that. That was very interesting to hear. So you did say people were talking about oil and that type of stuff.

JAMES: Well, what I was saying is that Nigeria had a lot of money from oil sources and had amassed significant amounts of fallen reserve based on the oil economy. And the leadership of the country felt that Nigeria had arrived at the world stage because of the energy power, because of the oil money... or because of the wealth of the country based on oil resources. But then it also triggered looting of Nigerian wealth which for me traced back to that FESTAC event.

LOLA: Well I wanna say thank you so much for your time today - or tonight. I know we went a little bit over than what I said, but I really enjoyed hearing everything that you had to say... I learned a lot about you. Do you have anything else you want to say? Or is there anything else that I should have asked about?

JAMES: I think we can continue the conversation some other time. I know you have a lot of assignments too that you need to get done, but I just want to thank God for allowing you to be in my life - and in the life of your mom. We love you and are very proud of you...[goes on saying things like this]

Thank you for interviewing me.

LOLA: Okay! So nothing significant that you think we missed or anything?

JAMES: Not really, you know I talk a lot so...

LOLA: I think I asked all of the questions I wanted to ask...One more quick, final question. You mentioned at the very beginning of our interview that you had a middle name that had a special meaning, so I was wondering if you would be willing to share what that is and what it means.

JAMES: Well the middle name is Bolanle, which literally means "A child that was born into the wealth of the family" My father was supposed to have been a very rich man when I was born, so I was born into wealth...So yeah, Bolanle - a child of prosperity.

LOLA: And now you have wealth in education and children and family...

JAMES: Yes! The Lord has blessed me and blessed us. Your mom is a doctor [Phd]. You are a scholar in your own right, and your brother is a scholar in his own right. So, yes, we are blessed.

LOLA: Amin [Amen in Yuroba]. Well, that is all I had today.

JAMES: Eseun. Eseun is thank you [in Yuroba]

LOLA: Eseun

JAMES: You're welcome

LOLA: This was fun. I am very happy I got to talk to you about this...Well, I think I'm going to end the recording now, but thank you so much again.

JAMES: Odaro

LOLA: Odaro...

JAMES: Odabo.

LOLA: Odabo?

JAMES: Mm-hmm. Odabo is bye. Odaro is goodnight.

LOLA: Okay, odabo daddy.