

PROFILE/INTERVIEW OF CHIEF EMEKA OSEMENAM, FNIQS, PPNIQS



1. Who is Chief Emeka Osemenam?

Chief Emeka Osemenam was born on 31st May, 1941 in Onitsha, Anambra State. He had his primary and secondary school education in Nigeria and in 1960 entered into Nigeria College of Arts Science, Enugu, to study Estate Management and departed to the UK in January 1963 to study quantity surveying. He finished his studies in 1970 and went to work in Kenya between 1973 – 1975. He returned to Nigeria in 1975 into private practice with Owete and Nwosisi as Owete Osemenam and Nwosisi Partnership. This devolved into separate practices in 1983. He went to Southern Africa (Zambia/Botswana) in 1985 to establish a multi disciplinary practice and returned back home to Onitsha in November 2014. He is now enjoying his old age as a Red Cap Chief of Onitsha from 2015 to date.

2. Why did you study quantity surveying, which option did you have apart from quantity surveying?

I was offered to do civil Engineering in Zaria which I considered far away from home and then settled for Estate Management being offered in Enugu.

3. Who inspired you to study QS when the profession was relatively new at the time?

Estate management was my original concept as I was looking forward to running a huge rubber plantation in Calabar in those days. As it turned out, Estate Management had other courses and my interest in the built environment pushed me into Quantity Surveying hoping to be involved in major estate development and related infrastructural activities.

4. You have been in the profession of QS for a long period of time. Can you share your experience on QS practice or different stages of Nigerians economic development?

Quantity surveying took one into the financial management of construction projects. Cost control was a very exciting process. It makes you feel that the contractor has made a decent profit and the client has got a good value for the funds expended.

It was a major battle in the early seventies to convince both government and private sector that we have a very constructive role to play in the construction industry. Initially the profession was run by UK based firms employing Nigerians to work for them. The Nigerian professionals started branching out on their own to challenge the foreign monopoly. It took a lot of lobbying for the system to believe that Nigerians can handle whatever project is thrown at us. We had to convince the civil servants, the military and then the politicians to allow us make effective unpack in the economic development of Nigeria whilst trying to create awareness of the profession in the schools and colleges and finally the universities. It entailed extensive lobbying in all the states by moving council meetings and conferences to various State Capitals in the country to sensitize the government and prospective students.

There were not many QS and we had to travel long distances to projects all over the country by road mostly as the airlines didn't fly to many state capitals. As the work load increased we needed more staff and offices and had to recruit a lot of foreign professional from West Africa. The UK and east and central Africa.

It was fulfilling that we handled all the military projects and a large chunk of the private sector development throughout the country and our clients were generally happy with our performances.

5. What are the challenges of the QS practice at the various stages?

We had several challenges in the early days, you have to prove that you have the vital educational experience to handle projects even as an employee of foreign owned practices, you have to convince the civil servants that you are competent in your field and even better than our foreign counterparts. You have to convince the military authorities then that you can be trusted to perform even better the expatriates and that your nationalism is an asset. Having got the project you now have to source for professional hands to help you perform which led to recruitment of many foreign consultants. You have to develop the management expertise for controlling consultants from various nationalities and it helped us boost our capabilities in other African countries. You have to set up offices in many parts of the country and develop the appropriate management expertise. As it were, technology was changing the way the profession is run and you have to adapt or perish.

6. Choice of career in a QS – Government employment: Teaching, Contractors QS Consulting – what informed your decision.

I must say I have been through all the facets as mentioned above, I started in the private practice in the UK and also worked for Surrey Country Council. I went to Kenya and worked for the Nairobi City Council. I also did part time lecturing in Nairobi, Kenya. I have worked with contractors as a specialist consultant on major projects in East and Central Africa making and agreeing claims on their behalf. In Nigeria I started as a consultant in the private sector in partnership with two other colleagues. This was an attempt to broaden my overall professional vista which I think I got.

7. Being one of the early QS in the country and you have been in private practice, can you give a brief history of QS practice in Nigeria (personal perspective) plus challenges in partnership?

Having worked in the UK in both private sector and government and in Kenya in local government by 1973 when I came back to Nigeria I had already made up my mind to start in the private consulting sector. I made contacts with colleagues before I left Nairobi. Chief Owete was working for an English firm in Lagos and chief Nwosisi was in Housing in Enugu. The practice took off as Owete Osemenam and Partners in 1973 and by 1975 was expanded to Owete Osemenam and Nwosisi with offices in Lagos, Benin and Enugu. Each partner ran one office. All correspondences were copied to all the offices so we kept tab on the activities in each office. We met every month in rotation where we reviewed all activities in the month, checked our accounts and approved issues relating to staff and practice system. We also agree the remuneration of the partners. We may also consider loans to partners but made sure that strict limits are placed and that all partners received the same advances to carry out their own private individual projects as distinct from the development of the practices. When an office is extremely busy we may sent out staff from other offices to assist them and to optimize this we have guest houses in each branch. We handled projects all over the country and eventually set up another office in Kano which was run by an Associate. The associate attended our partners meeting except the issue bothering on financial decisions amongst the partners.

It worked extremely well for us and we grew very rapidly, at some point we begin to notice that our interest outside the professions were not dovetailing together, there were interest in sports, politics and of global view and we amicably dissolved the partnership in 1983 with each partner running their base station. There was no anger or animosity. It was a peaceful divorce and we continued to be good friends today even after the demise for Chief Owete. After the divorce I branched out to global overseas practices and in 1985 I set up offices in Lusaka Zambia, Gaborone, Botswana and Windhoek Namibia. The Lusaka office was very successful but we decided to concentrate in Botswana from 1986 to date. I retired from practice in December 2014 and the practice is in the hands of a Nigerian who joined the office in 1990. I have enjoyed the pioneering status over time from being the 1st African QS in Kenya and Botswana and the 1st African QS practice in Botswana. It has been full of challenges but very rewarding in the process. We were able to show that what the whites do we can also do and even better. ***For a partnership to survive and prosper there must be honesty, trust and respect for each partners views.*** The beauty is in fusing them together to make a success.

9. During the early stages of QS in Nigeria what is the clients perspective of the QS partner in the industry then,

In the late sixties there were only a few Nigerian quantity surveyors and no indigenous consulting practice. The local QS was used to secure commissions where the oversea partners realize that the official is from your area of the country. When in the early seventies Nigerian local firms came into being and needed to survive and compete with the expatriates firms, one had to rely on the old school network or the network of your uncles and relations in areas of interest who would arrange for interviews for you to go and sell the profession. Some officials were not sure that we had adequate knowledge to carry out projects on our own. For all the faults of the military they were responsible for employing a lot of QS in the Ministry of Defense. Their performances cleared the way for the others in private practice to get into military projects and their patronage made it possible to build up trust for local professionals in their various disciplines. We had some problem with some architects which soon died off but a major problem was with Services and Civil Engineers which I am sure still exists now in certain circumstances. We marketed ourselves and our profession very effectively that by the eighties not very many people were ignorant of the value of the profession but it was a hard grind .

10. Do you share the opinion that the early QS practices enjoyed more patronage in terms of jobs opportunities and remuneration than now .

Yes and no. We enjoyed very little patronage in the very early days of late sixties and early seventies but the number of professional practices were few so there was enough for all practices but by the mid

seventies many firms had spring up but coupled with the successful awareness of the profession many firms had enough work to keep their staff busy.

In the early days the fee scale was set by the profession but the former President General Obasanjo was in the Ministry in 1975, he unilaterally cut the fees to maximum of 10% and sliding. It was a major blow to all consultancies in the built environment. The effect was soothed by the increase in workload but you had to work more to survive.

By the eighties the professions went into a regime of fee bidding with clients deciding what suited them - the Federal Government fee scale or a negotiated fee.

Quite frankly that's when I decided to decamp as "Andrew" and look for greener pastures overseas where profession were held in higher esteem than here. I have hardly practiced here since the mid eighties so I am not too conversant with the remuneration packages obtaining now .

11. In terms of learning and training will you say the early QS are at advantage over the modern day QS.

Many of us were trained in the UK with some in Canada and Australia. The professions have been embedded in their system. With the result, we have a wide range of experiences especially for those who worked in the private sector. We had the opportunity to work and attend evening classes which was a boost to the local industry and the students discussed current professionals issues arising from their employment. A few institutions ran a full academic courses expecting the graduates to go in to industry to acquire practical experiences to enable them complete their Test for Professionals Competence Examinations. The latter is what obtains in the industry today giving the students sound academic standards and pick up field and practical competence latter. The current situation is preferred as you obtain your academic competence and decide your way forward.

12. Advise for modern day QS career development, investment, practices, partnerships, etc

Having chosen a career, you must endeavor to be the best in that field. It involves the knowledge of the developmental processes required. You will map them out and decide how to tackle the various obstacles and challenges that abound. Discuss with your seniors and colleagues whatever challenges you met on the way. From the very beginning always think of investing any surpluses funds you have into real estate, stock and shares, manufacturing in the field of construction where you have some expertise. Do build up Investment portfolio with other colleagues. One man ventures are not recommended unless you a lucky chap. Make professionalism the bedrock of your practice as the built up ethics will carry your practices further than you can envisage. Look for compatibility in choosing your business partners. Integrity, trust and honesty will carry you all the way even in the dire circumstances.

13. Regrets for being a QS?

After 56 years in the profession I have absolutely no regrets for choosing QS instead of civil Engineering and I have made my mark in this field.

14. Still practicing or retired?

I have gracefully retired in November 2014 only providing occasional inputs in the practice in Botswana and I am enjoying my retirement

15. Are your colleagues that you started together still around?

It is unfortunate that many of our founding father colleagues have gone but on my last recount of the first hundred colleagues at least 40 of us are still alive and kicking and we thank God for his mercies

16. What would you like to be remembered for?

As quantity Surveyor who helped in pioneering the acceptance of the profession and raised it to a great height in Nigeria. As a very active member of the Institute until a few years ago. As the first President of the Quantity Surveyors Registration Board (QSRBN) for its first 6 years of existing laying the foundation for greater achievement of the board. As practitioner and pioneer professional in spreading the QS

profession in Africa with offices with offices in Lusaka, Zambia and Gaborone Botswana setting up multi-disciplinary consultancies in project management. Now that I have retired I am happy being a Chief at Onitsha in the Obi's traditional council where we are giving out the benefits of our long experience to the Onitsha Kingdom.