



## EBELE OKOYE [Omenka Ulonka]

### MY STORY

In The Beginning..

I was born during the [Nigeria-Biafra civil war](#) which lasted from 1967 to 1972. Immediately upon my birth, the hospital got bombed and my mum had to escape with me, the umbilical cord still dangling.

The youngest of seven children, after the war, my father went back to the city with my other siblings but my mother stayed put in our hometown "[Igbo Ukwu](#)", a remote village in the South-eastern part of Nigeria.

Growing up in this place, folk and fairy tales were part of my life. These were told orally by adults to us children gathered around a bonfire on moonlight nights. Also my brothers in the city sometimes sent me comics (Hank Ketcham's Denis the Menace and Peanuts)

The combination of all of the above always set my imaginations running and I longed to have these characters come to life and actually speak and do the things I heard or read.

The Vision Drops

As early as age 7, I already knew that I wanted to become an animation film maker, even without knowing that this was called "animation".

However, there were no such schools in Nigeria then, where one can study such a subject. Sundays, we had house visits from a religious group called "Jehova's witness" These shared

[Omenka Ulonka](#) | [bio](#) | [wikipedia](#) | [ig-basic](#) | [ig-vr](#) | [fp-page](#) | [vimeo](#) | [twitter](#) | [merch](#)

their pamphlets "Awake" and "The Watchtower" The rebel in me rejected "Watchtower" but found pleasure in "Awake" because of the rich illustrations and interesting articles. So it happened that when I was about 13, one of such articles was about how animation is made. From that moment on, there would be no stopping me.

## The Hard Life

My mom was a hobby seamstress and an auxiliary teacher in a primary school but our major form of income was making ["Akara"](#). These we carried in a showcase to the market 13 kilometres away on foot to sell. Akara is a typical delicacy from my region which is made from smoothly ground bean paste, formed in balls and deep fried to a crusty shell and soft insides. We would get up as early as 5AM to grind these with mortar and pestle before they are fried. There was the opportunity of having this done in a mill within 5 minutes but the next mill was at the market

## Poverty Driven Versatility

By age 12, I had learned to make own clothes and shoes, because we could not afford any readymade stuff. On many occasions, I, (as well as other siblings) were sent home from school for inability to pay school fees. Because of the level of poverty we were faced with, in a society where affluence was worshipped, I was getting excluded in a lot of circles. On one occasion, I was not allowed to ride the tail of a neighbour's pick up van because my dress just was not pretty enough. I became more and more a loner, but very inquisitive one whose companions were the radio - torn apart and soldered back, the sewing machine - dismantled and built back. I was drawn to any available gadget that held some possibility discovery on the insides. Of course, most of the times, these never worked after my "mishandling" but I was exploring my creativity: something I would come to value later

## No Way Forward

While still in secondary school, knowing that languages would increase my chances, I started teaching myself French outside of my curriculum, and later in my polytechnic days: German.

This was the pre-internet era. I so much wanted to leave Nigeria that I would comb telephone books, call random people to ask them for help. As can be envisaged, none of my called yielded fruit.

I was also writing schools abroad which I came across in some foreign newspapers and magazines. My applications were either off-shot or too late because of the time it took to lay hands on these publications.

Just Two Dollars!

At the age of 16, I received a scholarship to an Art School in the UK but my mum could not raise 60 Naira (today: less than one dollar) to put me on a plane, despite that I was going to get a refund.

Still nursing the dream of animation, I studied Fine Arts, later specialized in Graphic Design and Illustration while seeking, hoping and waiting for opportunities.

The Young Graduate

Upon graduation in 1989, I ran a tailoring business for a while in my city, [Enugu](#) before moving to [Lagos](#), where I worked in advertising as a graphic designer and copywriter. On the side, I was freelancing as a cartoonist and writer in tabloids. After one year in advertising, I got fired for being a rebel who refused to adhere to the normative female dress code as obtained in my society then.

Subsequently, I terminated my freelancing activities and settled as a full time independent studio artist.

In 1995, I had my first show ever, "Storms of the Heart" (a solo exhibition) at the National Museum, Lagos. It was a stepping stone for me which helped me start building my network. I started having exhibitions while earning steady money painting oil portraits.

Can German Bring Me Forward?

In 1995, I simultaneously registered for French and German at the Alliance Française and Goethe Institut, later dropped French and focused on German. During my period there, using their library, my earlier telephone directory calls got "upgraded" to writing schools in Germany as well as applying for artists residencies. Many years later, I got a residency at "Schloss Plüschow" but it got daunted by the known visa issues.

First Visit To Germany

In 1996, I had a financially successful exhibition and was lucky to get a Schengen Visa. So I invested the money on a visit to Germany seeking schools and opportunities.

On arriving in Germany, I was hosted in a small Lower Saxony community called Kuhstedtermoor, from where I got to know the Artists' Village in [Worpswerde](#), (home of Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn Becker)

Inspired, I made art, which, with the help of my hostess, I put in Cafés, Dentists' praxis and any

space that was offered. A matter of survival, I wanted to be seen. I wanted to get leads to animation schools. Yet to no avail.

Sorry, You Can't Stay!

Also, being that the German immigration law does not allow one seek admission with a tourist's visa, I had to go back to Nigeria. Back home, I resettled at the library of Goethe Institut and applied to any school I came across, even for things I either clearly was not qualified for or are outside of my focus. I had to get out!

Admission? Sorry No Visa or You

Eventually in 1997, I got a two-year PG in African Studies at the [University of Cologne](#) but for three years, the German embassy did not grant me visa. The University -kindly enough- kept extending my registration.

My last extension was going to expire on the 28th of April 2000 by 12:30pm.

On the 27th of April 2000, 4.30 pm, I was [paged\\*\\*](#) by the German embassy to come and collect my visa.

*(\*\*Before the advent of internet and mobile phones for all in Nigeria, you registered at a central telephone service and then got a pager, a gadget that would send you sms to notify you of calls and messages.)*

Less than 6 hours to leave, or Rot!

The next flight to Germany was by 10 pm., hence, I had less than 6 hours to leave Nigeria. Less than 6 hours that would change my destiny and view on life.

*\*\*When I got paged, I was paying 300,000 Naira (cash) into my bank account. On reading the message, I collected my money back, stepped out of the bank and like in a movie, there was a Lufthansa Office directly opposite the bank. I bought a one way ticket for 280,000 Naira for the last available seat (16D) rushed back to my studio, collected my passport, tore a few paintings from the wall, rolled these under my arm, packed some underwears and headed for the airport. I lost all my life's belongings in the process, but this is another story!*

Cologne Now! What Next?

On getting to Cologne, I registered for my Post graduate but was still searching for animation schools. This led to my registering once more to study design at the [University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf](#) while working as an English conversation leader in a language school

and an interpreter a translation office, with deployment to the Federal Office of Refugees, Customs offices, The police, as well as District and Magistrate courts.

Finally, A Lead!

At my English school, a new student introduced himself as a staff of the [West German Broadcasting \(WDR\)](#). I instantly asked if they had an internship position. He gave me the telephone number of his boss whom I called the next day and got accepted.

While interning at WDR, I heard about the [International Film School Cologne \(ifs\)](#) I called them and was told that the application for the next training year was closing in two days. As usual, I was running against the clock but my application was successful! I was one out of the 10 students they admitted for 2D cartoon animation. This was in 2003.

The first steps towards accomplishing my dreams had been met.

A Dream About To Materialize

Under the tutelage of great animation masters like [Michael Dudok de Wit](#), [Sylvain Chomet](#), [Leo Hobaica](#), [David Nasser](#) and the late trio [Jimi Murakami](#), [Harald Siepermann](#), and [Larry Lauria](#), I found myself doing exactly that which I had yearned to do since I was seven.

It was an extremely intensive course which left me only the choice of working nights. So I found myself at the kitchen of the backstage restaurant of Cologne arena washing plates, earning peanuts and talking talking science to the confusion of the other kitchen workers.

Backed by the financial help of friends who contributed to the training fee of 3,000 euros per year, I gave my best and embraced the training with all my might.

My first visit to [Annecy](#) was as a student of Animation at this school. I, who had no shoes, now with 15 other people on an exclusive flight to France, to watch Animation films? This must be the stuff fairy tales are made of.

What I pledged

When I was seeking ways to leave, I made a pack in my spirit that I would use bring my knowledge back home to Nigeria.

I finished the Animation training in 2004 and in 2006, I made my first official short animation [“The Lunatic”](#)

I was exposed the animation film making world and the networks involved. DOK Leipzig, Annecy, ITFS etc. Yet I did not feel complete.

## First Nigerian Animator?

Basically, I became not just the first female Animator of Nigerian origin but one of the pioneers of African Animation, hence some fondly called me “The Mother of African Animation” My elation in this is not about the names and titles but about the proof that perseverance always pays.

## Africa Movie Academy Awards

In 2008, I sent [“The Lunatic”](#) to the 4th Africa Movie Academy Awards. It was the only and first ever animation entered for the awards. It was given [the honourable mention](#). I was not just the only animator in the country at that time the only animator out of the country.

## Burning to Build a network

My pledge to share the knowledge I got back home remained unfulfilled. I was burning to build a network of African animators but did not know how. Every avenue I deployed (one of which was “My Space”) yielded a dead end.

## The Animation Club Africa

In 2009, I heard of the social media network called Facebook. In 2010, to my joy, I found out that one could start a networking group right there on the platform. That was how I started [“The Animation Club Africa”](#) on 10th April 2010.

As the group flourished, I got reconnected back to Nigeria.

## smedLAB Animation Course

My favourite brother, Ifeanacho Okoye, a quantity surveyor, was so happy for me that I have achieved this dream. So to assist me in my dreams of bringing me and my knowledge home, he started an animation studio "Shrinkfish Limited"

I possibly could not go back because I just got into the animation scene in Germany and am doing projects.

Nevertheless, I need to find a connection between where I am and where I came from. A connection which would enable me fulfil my pledge of bringing the knowledge back.

Hence, in March 2013, I held [Nigeria’s first ever animation course](#) at the Goethe Institut Nigeria. This was about the most satisfying state of my journey. It was more than elating to see other people, under my tutorship taking steps towards accomplishing their dreams. I could see me

back in the days with my big dreams of wanting to know how animation is made and I could feel the sense of fulfilment associated with the possibility of getting this knowledge.

At the end of the course, some of the students got a hands-on experience in Animation by being active as trainees for my 28 Minutes Nigerian German Coproduction "[The Legacy of Rubies](#)" which won the Africa Movie Academy Awards in 2015. *The voice of the main character Mfalme was spoken by one of the trainees, Olukayode Abobadoye.*

The state of things

Over the years, Animation has advanced in Africa and Nigeria. A lot has happened within a very short span. There are many studios doing wonderful projects. With this advancement, Nigeria and Africa have become the focus of international festivals like Annecy as well as producers and distributors like Cartoon Network and Netflix.

Over the years, I have

- worked on a lot of personal projects
- led international co-productions
- given animation workshops to children and adults as well
- imparted my knowledge to students of German Universities.
- won many awards globally.
- been in the jury and selection committees for prestigious awards and festivals.
- been featured in many German televisions and newspapers.
- been constantly invited to many prestigious German literary and theater events,

but no joy these bring can surpass the feeling of being catalyst to someone achieving their dreams, not just in Animation but generally being motivated by my story.

I was almost 35 before I could accomplish a vision I had when I was seven.

I have other big visions in animation but sincerely, none of them can surpass the joy of seeing the results and contributing in encouraging others in the field of Animation.

Persevere!

Some dreams take time to accomplish but with consistency, perseverance and hard work, we can pave a way and follow it to our goals even if this sometimes takes a while

