

JOINT RESEARCH: TÜBINGEN AND CAMEROON

INTERVIEW BY MORITZ MALMEDE

Faktor14: Hello, nice to meet you Babette. Can you introduce yourself to our readers?

Babette: Hi, my name is Babette Abanda. (Babette Josiane Guimband Abanda), I prefer to be called Babette Abanda, because it is easier, especially for Germans. I was born in Douala in the littoral region of Cameroon. I am from Bafia in the Center region. Guimband means “red bean” in my mother tongue, literally “guin-am-bang”, the bean which is red!

What is your research about?

I am designing a biochip, which could help to identify parasites transmitted by ticks in cattle blood. Cameroon does not yet have the infrastructure to find out with sufficient certainty what pathogen we have in our tested samples. With the newly developed chip produced by a German biotech firm the identification will be directly done in Cameroon, so there is no need to carry the samples to Germany, anymore!

You are finishing your PhD in Tübingen right now. How did you end up here?

Coming here was a real struggle. When I did my Master's degree back in Cameroon in 2011, I had many problems because of lack of funding. Normally, when you want to do a PhD or Master's in Cameroon you have to buy your own reagents if

your supervisor does not have a project. Fortunately, I was doing my thesis at the Programme Onchocercoses Field Station of the University of Tübingen in Ngaoundéré. My supervisor Alfons Renz has a project funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), and Albert Eisenbarth, a former Postdoc from his group, got the RiSC grant from the University of Tübingen and the Ministry of Science, Research and Arts in Baden-Württemberg financing my ongoing work.

But the beginning of my research was not going forward so smoothly. After I graduated at the University of Ngaoundéré in North Cameroon against all odds after the challenges it dragged me through, I got even more interested in research, especially on cattle pathogens. The whole region around Ngaoundéré is one of the largest cattle breeding areas in whole of Central Africa! With support from my German colleagues, I applied for the DAAD doctoral scholarship (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) in 2011, but I did not make it. I really wanted to continue with research, so I applied for another one: a short-term travel grant from the Boehringer Ingelheim Foundation. Although it was only for a two-month's visit in German laboratories, it felt like such a big victory! I still smile when I think about it. My stay at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Tübingen was a real mind opener, and made me believe that strong effort may finally pay off!

Why was that?

It was really nice there. I just started to see things differently, in a different way. I worked there on genetic markers – so-called microsatellite typing – with the work groups of Wolfgang Hoffmann and Velavan Thirumalaisamy. After those two months, I knew exactly what I wanted to do next. I started to understand topics I had been working with for some time without real knowledge. People were always nice and warm to me, which made my stay enjoyable and very productive in the short time.

Back in Cameroon, I started to develop my actual PhD project. I applied the second time at the DAAD for a full doctoral scholarship, but they declined my application once again. I did not bother to know why, I only knew I should not give up, which I did not. In 2013, the Otto Bayer Foundation granted the application for fieldwork in Cameroon to a colleague of mine and we were able to collect all the samples. For the third time I applied for the DAAD scholarship, and finally, I got it this time! It was a so-called binational sandwich program, granting funding for an 18 months stay in Germany, plus 6 months German language training. Almost at the same time, I received a Teach@Tuebingen grant financed by the Excellence initiative. It was in December 2014 making it a wonderful Christmas gift! Since then, I am in Tübingen and work in the Parasitology group of Alfons Renz at the Department of Comparative Zoology.

You went through a lot of trouble during your PhD project. How come you were willing to do so much for your research?

Well, my father is a teaching director for technology and mathematics, and my mother is an educational inspector, so my family has an academic background. But it is more that I enjoy taking the challenge. Doing my Masters degree was really difficult for me, but somehow I kept on going. In my case, the difficulties were more because of the lack of funding. After that, I was immunized, and I knew I wanted to do this PhD even if I had to go through the same, or even more pain. Personally, I find it really interesting how far I am ready to go.

You are finishing your PhD soon. Any plans on what to do next?

When my DAAD scholarship ends, I want to become a “BW Stiftung” scholar for the time to finish my dissertation. In the same context, I am preparing the creation of a new BW-Stiftung regional chapter in Cameroon. Those Regional Chapters exist all around the world and are built to support students seeking training to build their academic career.

Concerning my personal career, I would like to be part of the teaching community at a Cameroonian university, like the University of Ngaoundéré. I feel the desire after my qualification in Germany, to share my experiences with others, and support students as much as possible to develop their skills in epidemiology and molecular biology. I would like to be an example for others and share my knowledge if it helps anyone to pursue his or her dreams in science.

What is your experience living in Germany?

I came to Germany for the first time in March 2013. I got told by German students I knew from Cameroon that the German weather is quite nice in spring. It is not. It was so cold and I did not bring any warm clothes with me. I can rate my cultural shock as strong. I did not know a single German word. When I tried to buy ingredients for Spaghetti with tomato sauce, a dish people normally cook when they have no idea what else to eat, I could not read the labels. So I asked for help, but as weird as it sounds, nobody could help me, because the people working there did not understand English at all. I ended up with two different tubes with sauce. The pasta ended up really really sweet. It could not have been worse, so I threw everything away and had to go to bed empty stomached.

Fortunately, one of my German friends I knew from the project in Cameroon decided to organize my groceries, and we went shopping together. That saved me plenty of time, improved my diet and prevented further culinary disasters.

What is the biggest cultural difference between Cameroon and Germany?

In my opinion, the Germans do not laugh enough. They seem always so serious. If you enter a bus in Cameroon and you say “Hi”, people will greet you back and perhaps chat with you. In Germany, nobody will answer. At first, I wondered maybe they do not like me. But then I realized Germans are just like this. They are also very aware of their private space. In Cameroon, people are always touching each other while talking. It almost never happens in Germany, except for fresh couples and small children.

You could say you have a lot of experience now in studying abroad. What would you recommend to students who are reading this interview and also want to go on an adventure by studying in another country, maybe even Cameroon?

I met a girl recently at a writing skill seminar from Nils Anthes (amazing course by the way). She told me she may go to Cameroon for a project, but is not sure whether she is prepared. I gave her a big smile! In the public media, Cameroon is a “No Go” country. Between the news of dangerous diseases, terrorism, civil conflict and so on, nobody wants to go there at the end

of the day because people are afraid. Also once a German friend of mine went to Cameroon for his bachelor fieldwork, some days after his arrival his father called him to immediately return back to Germany, because of an Ebola outbreak in the neighboring country Nigeria. What I want to say is that in Cameroon, like in every other place in the world, both good and bad stuff can happen. You just read about the bad stuff. For students coming from Tübingen, the guesthouse of the Programme Onchocercoses field station provides a save and enjoyable place to stay right in the center of the town of Ngaoundéré (www.riverblindness.eu).

What are your parents thinking about you studying in Germany for so long?

My parents support my decision to study abroad. In my family, I am the only one seeking for a PhD, my older brothers are engineers, my younger sister is a nurse and my older one a high school guidance counsellor. They all want me to get my degree and go back home to celebrate, and I cannot wait for this moment to come. I consider myself very lucky to be able to follow my dream, to have people believing in my success and willing to push me further. Therefore, I make sure to get the best out of it in every possible way. My mother just does not want me to get married in Germany. (laughs)

Anything else you like to add?

For those coming to Germany from Cameroon, Africa or anywhere else: For a successful stay you need clearly defined goals and an actual plan how to get there. There are so many easy trails to follow the wrong way and loose oneself. Keep contact with your acquaintances back home, they keep you afloat and motivate you. Do not isolate yourself, connect with the culture, get involved in associations and have a plan for your return home. Most important of all, enjoy your stay! I have not yet been in a place where time goes as fast as in Germany.