

Summary of oral history interview with Clement Ogbonnaya

Date of interview: 9th September 2021

INTERVIEW WITH: Clement Ogbonnaya

INTERVIEWER: Sarah Gudgin

LOCATION: South London Gallery, Peckham

File number: CLEMENT_OGONNAYA_WAV_FILE

DURATION: [01:17:47]

[00:00:00]

Clement Ogbonnaya, born 24th August 1981 Lagos Nigeria. Speaks about celebrations for his 40th birthday. Feels he is getting older, when he was younger he didn't think about being 40. Thinks about his wife, child and another child on the way and feels grateful. Reflects on being 40 and what it represents for him, a change of focus to the next generation, he wants to create a legacy and leave something behind. Never know your impact in life. He likes people, he is good to and with people. Wasn't happy to be 40, but life begins at 40, he now understands what they mean.

Reflects on how the year of Covid has reinforced his views about the world he would like to live. He can be whimsical, but he believes in live and let live, tolerate, love, accepting differences etc. He is at a point where he feels the only person he is in competition with is himself.

During lockdown, it is the only time in his life when the world has had a pause button. It was a time when people were able to take stock of themselves and the world around them what they wasn't to do and achieve. During the first lockdown he was grateful to be able to spend three months with his daughter. His wife is a doctor and had to work, but for him it was a time he'd never had since her birth in 2017 due to work.

Speaks about how it has made him want to accelerate and impact more people and how he gives a lot of himself to others. He is in the hospitality industry because he loves people, he doesn't want the next generation to have the tough upbringing and challenges that he had. More opportunity when we work together and seeing each other as allies not enemies.

[00:05:39] Parents are from the Ibo tribe from the east. Siblings were born in the village. Dad worked for Samsung, had a place in university London, family came in 1986/7. Describes coming to UK as another world, felt alien.

He had a stutter which his Dad beat it out of him. Wouldn't change his upbringing, but hates that he can't speak his mother tongue.

Family initially settled in Balham in a bedsit, mum and dad slept on a mattress. They moved to New Cross Gate. At primary school it wasn't cool to be to be African, but it was ok to be West Indian, Jamaican or white. The time of Live Aid was not an easy time.

Dad was a cab driver and a student, mum worked for the Southwark Council. At school with Ian Wright's sons, he was an Arsenal fan, just wanted to play football. Attended Saint Thomas Apostle School, coming to Peckham was 'a bit wild'.

[00:09:51] Recalls there were a lot of black boys, jostling for position, wanting to be seen or heard at his Peckham school. He was sure of himself, quite small, but starting thinking about creating value, didn't want to fight people, didn't want to join a gang.

More afraid of his father than the police, if he was stopped by the police he would ask them not to tell his dad.

He was a character, a smiler and he liked people laughing, a clown, a pleaser. Fell in love with football, geography and maths. Geography seen as a white boy's subject in his school. He wanted to understand society, mix with people understand their culture and what makes people tick.

Unknown to him, his parents had not got their indefinite leave to remain. 1997 it finally came through. Understood why his parents were so keen that they didn't get into trouble, respect for his parents grew, they sacrificed so much and worked so hard for them.

Went to XFS College in Clapham, still shy, trying work himself out, wanted to play football, hang out in the Chaplaincy, whilst having rude-boy friends. Attended university in Coventry, mainly because he wanted to get away from strong parenting.

Parents are Methodists, he likes to say he is a Christian too. He went to church every Sunday with them. Clement liked church at first, they went together, met other children, played drums. As he got older he want to play football on Sunday, but his dad said no, so they resented church because it stopped them from doing things they loved doing. He stopped going when he went to university, just went occasionally.

Wanted to study law, but his father said no, made him take computer studies. Reflects on this. In his first year, he felt free because there was no mum and dad. Started to fall in love with parties. Memory of going his first rave, really felt like somebody and he noticed how happy everyone was.

[00:17:04] Became president of his ACS [African Caribbean Society]. Gained confidence, put on events. Discovered girls. Returned to London with a bump, no job, no graduate scheme, worked for GAP, then Armani, where he was fired after three months. No money, no work, moved back home to New Cross. When he got a job working at Xerox in Uxbridge, he was really happy to have a job.

Friends had parties in the West End, paid to run a guest list. Quotes a Drake song - he talked big back then, but now he can deliver. Took his mates to *China Whites*, loved events and parties everyone happy.

Approached to run a photographic make-over studio in Soho. It did well, so well, that he and another person who worked there approached the owners to set up another one, which they agreed. In 2006 he bought his first property in Brixton Hill at the age of 25, bought it for his now wife. Began to fear money less, was thinking about opportunities and felt able to take risks. Felt his social awkwardness waned felt more visible.

[00:23:30] Talks about an evolution in attitudes, even musically, more black artists that walked the same streets as him, like Tinie Tempah, Dizzee Rascal, So Solid Crew. Hip hop music was becoming more popular in America. He was still a black guy in a mostly white populated society, he wanted to get to know, to infiltrate, so that he could understand what it was that he wanted to change.

Education taught him problem solving, general knowledge and reading. Owning properties made him feel he was as good as other people. Why should he feel any less than white middle class men?

He thinks that the difference between rich and poor is access to information. If he has access to information, then they couldn't make him feel any less because of the colour of his skin. States that he feels more confidence now, being a dark-skinned man at the age of 40, than at any other time in his life.

He started to get a taste for business and ownership. However during the credit crunch, the studios didn't survive and he was left with two properties and no income. He decided to do some parties and used social media, target marketing 2004-2009, learning about Facebook etc. He approached a night club in Dean Street in the West End, with an idea to take on their Thursday slot, they agreed and made it pop. He asked for crazy money and they agreed.

Called his club night *Clemface*, hip hop, R and B, Afro Beats. It was a mixed crowd, but in the West End, having a mix is 'almost too dark'. He felt he was part of the problem where they only wanted white girls or girls of light skin tone coming in. Or that they couldn't let in a group of black males. Sometimes instructed by the owner of the club about what to do. It didn't sit right with him. Felt social responsibility, sometimes heard from his dark skinned girl friends that they couldn't get into a club, but their white friends could. It made him think of his dark skinned sister and yet he was there making money.

[00:29:30] Describes how much he enjoyed throwing the parties, watching people enjoy themselves. However, he didn't know what went on behind the scenes, such as staff wages and stock orders. He began to question what the club must be making on top of what he was making. Decided he wanted a larger cut without the social politics. Thinks fear can create ignorance about black people for club owners, even when they are playing music made by black people in the club.

In order to learn more about what went on behind the scenes, Clement started working for a venue operator and created a nightclub/ bar called *Love and Liquor* in Kilburn. It exposed him to the mechanics of behind the scenes and he learnt a lot. Idris Elba did a residency there for 7 weeks. The parties were packed and more people became aware of him. Clement did know how famous Idris was. It made him realise that this is what they could do as black men, being at the forefront of popular culture and they shouldn't have to dilute themselves. Worked at the club for two years and then it was sold.

[00:33:07] Clement was not a pub goer, pubs aren't part of the African culture. There weren't any places where he felt he could go, dad didn't go to pub. He had gone drinking in Coventry, but didn't feel he was going to a community haven.

Talks about working in *Paradise* in Kensal Green and what he liked about it. It was the most aspirational space/pub. Didn't like that it was targeted to Chelsea, Notting Hill set, forgetting about the locals. He thinks a place should reflect the community where it resides and challenge the community to raise the bar 'for us and our space'.

He knew he wanted a community pub and he wanted it to be fantastic, a place which would represent him and the community.

[00:37:07] 2015 he was unemployed for a time. He told his wife he wanted to sell one of his properties and invest in a pub. Family thought he was nuts, friends questioned him. He looked in South East London. Pubs are expensive, but he had a well-researched five year business plan which helped him to get started and understand the business. He wanted to create a ripple. Thinks a lot of new pubs are scared of the areas where they are in, which is why they are look past their community to go after aspirational, affluent clientele.

Clement knew there was business to be had in Peckham. Thinks there aren't enough spaces for old Peckham, the people who were there in the '80's and '90's before regeneration.

[00:40:00] Clement believes in regeneration and gentrification, when it is done responsibly. He doesn't want the old Peckham which he grew up in, where he would finish school and go home. Back then, he didn't want to hang around, it was frightening, although he never had any situations in Peckham, he heard and saw.

Remembers the time that Damilola Taylor was murdered was a sad time. It was a horrific period and really impacted the UK. He hasn't talked about it before, mentions Stephen Lawrence too, shocked that it was a black on black crime. After that point everyone was really scared of Peckham.

[00:43:33] The *Prince of Peckham* name came from the show *Desmonds*, which was the first tv show that Clement watched with his family where he was able to relate to black people in the show. The character of Lee, the Prince of Peckham, was a black wide-boy, speaking cockney and patwa. Rio Ferdinand and Chris Eubanks both called themselves the Peckham Prince. When Clement coined the name of the *Prince of Peckham*, he was saying that 'we are all royal, we are all regal and we should realise our value'.

When he had 'Welcome to Peckham' written on the front wall, it was to show people that they are all Peckham in that space. No one should ever make anyone feel less than, they treat everyone the same. They decided to put the image of a black boy and black girl and to show a normal image of black people, other than sportsmen and athletes. Clement wanted young black kids passing on the way to school to see themselves and to think that could be us.

[00:45:48] When Clement first saw the pub it was dead, dark and horrible. He was dared to go into it when he was at school and remembers an Irish pub which wasn't great. When he went to case the pub with a view to taking it on, it was devoid of character. He knew that the white landlord had bought the pub in the hope that the Woodbine Estate, which is now Peckham Square, would feed them, but it wasn't built until 2017. But they were scared of the area, because there was a lot of CCTV in the pub, which Clement inherited. Former landlord wasn't integrated into the community.

Clement observed the pub and then approached the landlord. Who was this black guy wanting to buy the pub? After purchasing, he closed for three months to do a refurb and reopened in May 2016 with a great crowd. He was wearing traditional Nigerian clothes on that day and he was so chuffed to be a black guy owning a pub in Peckham.

The pub has gone from strength to strength. He has got it to a point where they don't spend what they don't make. Refurb again in lockdown, cost £160K. He had been planning to buy another pub, but when lockdown happened he decided to reinvest that money into the pub and make changes to accommodate social distancing outdoors, which helped minimize the impact.

[00:50:00] During lockdown, they kept visible because it was a horrible time for many people. They did live streams, speed dating over zoom, more active over social media. Christmas giveaway. 12th April 2021, they reopened. Clement has been on tv and radio. Conversations taking place recently about equality diversity and Clement is going to take full advantage of this. Wants black excellence to be known about among the rest of society.

Clement tells people that the *Prince of Peckham* is not a black pub. They strive to be excellent. Comments often made about a black guy owning it. He asks, 'why can't we believe that we are incredible?'

Mentions a show he did with Tom Kerridge. *Golden Anchor* in Nunhead, which he thought was a yardie pub, which didn't appeal to him. Pubs appealing to different communities. Peckham is a melting pot. He walked past SLG, but never knew about it and he had never been inside. There are other black pub owners, but he wants their pub to be the best and create a truly inclusive space. Some people come who are not open to LGBTQ, he can read the situation, he might say, if you don't like it go to Weatherspoons.

[00:56:24] Inclusivity can't just be a buzz word. There are local characters, he wanted to talk to people, some people don't come back, but some locals do come back and never cause drama. Describes the mix of clients such as young black Peckham boys next to a group who have just bought flats in Bellendon Road, you can see integration and they feel part of the community. LGBTQ nights and safe spaces.

When Clement was creating the *Prince of Peckham* he went by himself to many different pubs and if he could talk to someone, that was a sign of a good pub. Pubs should be home from home.

Clement says each to their own, but he is going to make a change and add value to the community, if certain places want to appeal to certain types, that's fine. Bussey building discussion, some of these places are just doing what they know and appealing to certain people. He will still support them, but it is not the way he wants to do things.

To Clement, the *Prince of Peckham* represents integration, energy and love from his team of staff, he doesn't feel that anywhere else. Mentions that he is going to check out a pub in Hackney like the *Prince of Peckham*, he hopes it has the same values. As owners of pubs, they are the custodians of places that have been there for generations. The pub needs to remain the public house. It's sad that so many have closed, in most towns there is a church and a pub, 'somewhere to sin and somewhere to repent'. Discussion of the fate of pubs.

[01:04:08] Growing up, Clement could never have imagined how Peckham would change, didn't even know there was an art college. Didn't know about the community, didn't know there was affluence. He is happy that there are more creatives. Saw a Nigerian artist in the SLG and it's great that black and Nigerian artists can be creative today in Peckham, although it's a minority, because in a black family you have to be a doctor and an engineer.

Discussion about regeneration and gentrification. Gentrification doesn't deem black people to be part of the middle class standards. Transforming Peckham isn't the problem, most people who grew up in Peckham in the '90's would not want the area to stay the same. It comes down to money and access to money, loans or grants. White middle class people have connections. Talks about wanting his kids to have access to privilege too. He wants his kids to dream and not be shackled by financial responsibility. He can say this because he has been there. Every child should be allowed to dream big. Clement talks about Emma Raducanu, imagines that her family allowed her to dream big.

When regeneration is done responsibly and afforded to all access to opportunities. He likes to see all the black social enterprises and local working class kids doing things, it's exciting to see. Likes to see like-minded individuals coming together to feel happy and valued in his pub.

[01:11:47] For Clement the best thing about Peckham is the melting pot. There's a lot of characters and individuality, but there are also a lot of 'sheep' and some of the business and bars play it safe. Peckham is the most vibrant place in London. Talks about other places in London which have been gentrified and lose their soul, but Peckham resists and persists and does its own thing. Clement spends time in Peckham even when he is not working and when he was young he didn't want to be there. He doesn't want Peckham to go the way of Brixton.

Discusses the Aylesham Centre plans. What is going to happen? Will Peckham be consulted, doesn't want it to look like Oxford Street.

Clément's long term plan is to reinvent pub culture. There is a growing black middle class, no one wants to remain at the bottom of the pile forever. They work hard because they want to elevate and they can have the many opportunities in Peckham. He wants ownership to be the default and they should be doing everything for the next generation and their dreams. Thinks of his daughter in 15 years, bossing people.

Considers that the most oppressed people are dark-skinned women. He wants to flip that narrative and put women in power.

[01:17:47] Ends