

OWNERSHIP TRANSITION AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country made up of many mini nations with over 250 indigenous languages. There is a strong tribal affinity and this guides the decisions and actions of most of its people. In the case of Etteh Aro & Partners, it was otherwise. In this same setting of strong tribal affinity, two young men from diverse cultural backgrounds came together to forge a relationship, which they hoped would outlive them. In 1963/64 session, God brought late Lawrence Oluwemimo Arokodare, a young Yoruba man from Ijero Ekiti in Ado Ekiti State and Ette Ikpong Ikpong Etteh, a young Ijaw man from Upenekang in Akwa Ibom State together, when they were grouped in a Civil Engineering design team at the Ahmadu Bello University in their final year. The duo became the designers for the team. This collaboration developed into a mutual relationship. Our set was the last that sat for London University external B.Sc. in Engineering degree through the University of Ibadan in 1964.

The Expatriate Lecturers and the Arrival of Prof. Naylor

In the then Nigerian College of Technology, the expatriate lecturers were a source of discouragement. They were of the opinion that Nigerians could not be Engineers. The fact was that Engineering students were taking external B.Sc. London degree, and the lack of interaction with the external examiners created problems for some students who were forced to spend 7 to 9 years before graduating. In 1961/62 session, the duration of the course was cut from 4 years to 3 years. Late Lawrence and I obtained the B.Sc. London degree in Civil Engineering in 3 years.

The appointment of Prof. Naylor as professor of Civil Engineering in 1963/1964 brought about a turning point in our lives. Prof. Naylor had been a practicing consultant and had continued to combine consultancy and academics. He was the first professor of Civil Engineering in Ahmadu Bello University (ABU). Prof. Naylor taught us hydraulics – fluid mechanics. His lectures were illustrated with practical problems which he had encountered in practice. Prof. Naylor stressed the importance of the first five (5) years of professional practice. He advised us to get experience even if it meant being articled with poor salary, that after we have been chartered, money would come. This advice changed our focus toward profession practice. We decided to get experience at all cost.

The breakthrough came when late Engr. Lawrence got employment with Ove Arup & Partners (OAP) in Ibadan and they found that he was an excellent material to work with; Lawrence was asked if he had a friend as good as he was. Lawrence gave my name and went on to inform my elder brother; Prof. A. I. Ette now retired Professor of Physics to contact me to go to Ove Arup & Partners' office in Lagos to pick up my letter of employment. Late Lawrence was accused of giving work to an "Ibo man" instead of a brother Yoruba man. Lawrence's action was an uncommon action and I attributed that to the finger of God.

Ove Arup Experience and Exposure

I worked three months in OAP's office Lagos and was transferred to Ibadan office to join the team working on World Bank Road Development Studies in Western Nigeria. I was deployed as a location Engineer for the following roads: Ondo-Ife road, Ondo-Ore road and Ondo-Akure road. The Managing Partner, John Halls challenged me to find a route whose construction cost must not exceed

£50,000/km. He gave me the following fact and instructions: Rock cut is ten (10) times soft cut; to locate the route and design the profile and take off the quantities and check that the cost was within limits. My instruction to the surveyors was to avoid cutting the line over rock outcrops. John Halls gave me AASHTO - Geometric Design for Rural Highways. I had to study and master the following:

- Factors controlling horizontal alignment,
- Factors controlling vertical alignment,
- Combination of vertical and horizontal alignment, and
- Mass haul to ensure balance of cut and fill,
- Junction design.

Ondo-Ife road and the Ondo-Akure were the most difficult to meet the criteria and where rock cut was unavoidable, it was to be minimized. Lawrence joined me in Ondo for the location of Ondo-Ore and Ondo-Akure. From the Ondo roads, I went to Ijebu-Ode to locate and design Idiayunre-Ijebu-Ode road. From there to Omotosho to design Ore-Foriku-Okitipupa road.

In 1965, I was posted to Sapele-Benin road site. For me, this was a unique project that gave me useful exposure in Civil Engineering. The following problems were encountered and solved:

- Driving casing piles through four (4) metres of clay – the effect pore-water pressure;
- Total displacement of swamp 15m thick - the collapse of adjoining vegetation, solution was found by installing bush stick sheet piles;
- Setting up a theodolite 15m above water on a pier head of 0.5589m wide.

- Composite steel and concrete bridge, Pile Fenders.
- Finger Plate expansion which failed with subsequent use without maintenance. I was redeployed to the supervision of Ondo-Ife road two (2) weeks before the Biafra Army entered the mid-West.

The Necessity for Postgraduate M.Sc. Studies

The war acted in a way to facilitate our destiny. Late Lawrence had hoped that we would be partners in Ove Arup & Partners, but I was of the view that our future did not lie with Ove Arup & Partners. I therefore applied to University of Surrey, Guildford for a postgraduate M.Sc. degree course in Highway Engineering and was admitted for 1968/69 Session. When I approached John Halls for sponsorship, he called Lawrence and told him that the civil war had caused a lull in business and therefore it was a time for self improvement. Lawrence hurriedly applied to Leeds University and was admitted to study for M.Sc. degree in Transportation. John Halls was gracious in loaning us money for our M.Sc. studies. In December of 1968 in the U.K, late Lawrence and I attended and passed our professional examination in Civil Engineering and became chartered Engineers. I worked in Ove Arup & Partners London office, No. 8 Fitzroy Street during the Christmas and Easter holidays and after graduating from Surrey. I was forced to return to Ibadan office when I heard that Lawrence had returned.

End of Civil War & the Necessity to Act

When the Civil War ended in 1970, I persuaded Lawrence that this was the opportune moment for us to step out of Ove Arup and Partners. By this time we had taken over the road development studies for Ove Arup & Partners. I

was in charge of the traffic studies adopting the road Network approach and cost benefit analysis while Lawrence wrote the reports and all necessary documentation. We summoned up courage to approach John Halls and inform him of our intention and he advised us on the way to go grow our firm. We negotiated with him that we would continue to handle the studies at a fee; Lawrence would remain while I would move out to start the new company. Infact, it was late Lawrence who gave the name “**Etteh Aro & Partners**”. He found the lawyer and registered the firm. John Halls allowed us the use of their cars which he gave us when we returned. We had a cordial relationship with Ove Arup & Partners and handled the following projects in Consortium:

- Tafawa Balewa Square, Lagos (Civil Engineering part) Client: The Federal Ministry of Works, Lagos.
- Ikot Abasi-Eket Road (Client: Cross River State).
- Mimi River Bridge and Approach road to Ganaja Ferry Terminal bridges (Client: Federal Ministry of Works, Lagos).
- Onitsha-Enugu Dual Carriageway, Preliminary Engineering and Feasibility Study (Client: Federal Ministry of Works, Lagos).

First Project and the Challenge of Funding

After the Civil War, there was that urgent need to rehabilitate the Lagos-Shagamu-Ore-Benin Asaba road. An expatriate Engineer, late Engr. Durward who had faith in our ability, recommended to the then Director of Highways Engr. M. T. Usman that Etteh Aro & Partners should be commissioned to carry out the Design Studies and rehabilitation of Benin-Asaba road and we were given two (2)

months to produce studies and contract documents for the award of the rehabilitation contract. We remain eternally grateful to these two great Engineers. We had to carry out the Traffic Studies, Alignment Studies and Soil Studies for the road. Benin-Asaba road was about Eighty Seven (87) kilometres long. How was I to carry out the survey of both alignment and soil in 2 months? We were confronted with the challenge of funding and money to pay the labourers. I was to carry out the field studies, late Engineer Adigun was in charge of the studies and late Lawrence was to source for funds. The banks were looking for collateral which we did not have. Private individuals wanted to be made partners; people who were not engineers. We had to rely on the 1:50,000 contour maps which Aro extrapolated to 1m interval for quantification and I had to trek ten (10) kilometres a day recording what improvements were required – drainage, etc. From the traffic studies, we recommended the by-pass of Agbor and located the by-pass. Dumez won the contract promising to give the client a new road at the same cost of the rehabilitation, if Etteh Aro & Partners were removed as the supervising engineers. The suggested by-pass and realignments had resulted in the saving of approximately 7.5km, so by adopting our alignment Dumez made tremendous saving so the client lost out in that deal.

How far did Etteh and Aro go?

By 1983 before the Buhari coup which ousted Shagari, Etteh Aro & Partners had expanded; establishing sixteen (16) offices in Sokoto, Kano, Maiduguri, Kaduna, Jos, Abuja, Ibadan, Lagos, Abeokuta, Akure, Benin, Enugu, Port Harcourt, Calabar and Warri. Virtually all the offices in the North were established by Lawrence. We had grown Etteh Aro & Partners within the Thirteen (13) years to over 100 Engineers working full time but the Buhari coup brought depression in the

economy and we were not in a position to retain the Engineers. Most of our trained Engineers with M.Sc degrees were absolved by Shell and one became a Managing Director of a cement Company. Late Aro prophesied that if we would continue with our capacity building policy, we would one day produce a president for Nigeria. One of our Engineers participated unsuccessfully in the presidential primary on the platform of PDP; he is a senator today. Etteh Aro & Partners has made tremendous contribution to the Engineering Profession in Nigeria. Today Etteh Aro & Partners has ten (10) offices in Ibadan, Lagos, Abuja, Ado Ekiti, Akure, Benin, Warri, Port Harcourt, Uyo and Calabar. Our vision is ***to become an international company***; that is the task the new generation of Etteh Aro must achieve.

Ove Arup & Partner's Challenge

Our objective and vision was to operate at the same level with Ove Arup & Partners and to be able to drive them out of Nigeria altogether. How were we to achieve this? We decided to embark on Human capacity building but unlike Ove Arup & Partners, we would train our Engineers free of charge and without any strings attached and to date, we have trained 56 Engineers, some for M.Sc and others Ph.D. Unfortunately, we have not been able to drive out Ove Arup & Partners but we have forced them to retreat to Lagos. But the policy of human capacity building has earned us good will in many quarters and we have endeavored to keep cordial relationship with our former Engineers.

How Did Etteh Aro & Partners Survive This Long?

Etteh Aro & Partners started like the 'mustard seed' (in a parable told by Jesus Christ). This seed is the least of all seeds, but when it is grown, it is the greatest

among herbs, and becomes a tree so that birds of the air come and lodge on its branches. Indeed, this depicts the Etteh Aro & Partners story as we started with Late Lawrence and myself, but have been through 41 (forty-one) years and now have over 200 (two hundred) staffs. Coming this far has been very tough and challenging but also very worthwhile. And as I speak to you, we are still standing tall and strong, beaming with hope for a better future. I have already mentioned in the course of this presentation some of the factors that brought us this far. I will now highlight a few others.

First, ***Experience not money is emphasized*** because money would come with experience. The partnership is not about money, but quality Engineering Consulting Experience.

Secondly, Aro and I had obviously different habits and lifestyles, but we were ***men of like minds***. Hardworking engineers who were committed to the profession. We celebrated our differences as friends and respected our professionalism; that was why he could recommend me. So like John Halls did, ***we look out for passionate engineers***, and like Aro and I, ***although we all have our idiosyncrasies, at Etteh Aro & Partners, we are professionals of like mind***.

Thirdly, Aro did not believe that an engineer should be idle or go to teach in a secondary school. This philosophy led to the rapid expansion of the firm, and is still one of our beliefs in Etteh Aro & Partners. ***We are therefore very interested in providing jobs for young engineers/corps members, and industrial training for Engineering students***. This gives us a constant supply of junior engineers who grow in the system and get to senior ranks, and as such ***we always have a younger generation to succeed the older generation***.

Furthermore, our anchor on our core values has helped tremendously in sustaining the firm. These core values are:

Integrity: The records are there to speak for us. We would not compromise our standards for anything. A good name we believe is better than silver and gold.

Excellence: Every Engineer/Staff in EAP has excellence as a watchword, and as such our jobs are delivered with due diligence and the client retaining touch of excellence.

Corporate Social Responsibility: We believe in giving back to the society that we belong to, and this has helped us as we strive to affect the society.

Staff Development: This cannot be over emphasized. Every staff in EAP has an assurance of satisfaction in their career as we ensure that they are well equipped to perform their job. This helps them to stay long in the firm, and in turn develop the firm.

Professionalism: We encourage every engineer to become chartered and carryout our jobs with strict adherence to the ethics of the practice. This is also buttressed in the principle of all branch managers being professionals in Engineering, not just trained management personnel.

PARTNERSHIP – A MARRIAGE

Finally, I and late Lawrence were friends and partners in the firm until he passed on. At EAP, partnership is seen as a life-long relationship. We believe that differences among partners, which will always arise, can be resolved. It is like a marriage. If one can survive a marriage for life, then a partnership can also be

survived for life. The partners must endeavor to keep the unity and above all value the partnership, seeing it as more important than the individuals.

All of these, have brought EAP this far, and we have successfully set the ball rolling for the future.

The Way Forward

William Cowper (1731-1800), the hymn writer reminds us:

“God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform”.

Will Etteh Aro & Partners survive Ette and Lawrence?

Late Lawrence had a daughter and three sons. The daughter is a lawyer and a banker in Ireland. One of the sons has just finished his M.Sc. in accountancy in the UK. Another of the sons had finished M.Sc. in Architecture and Project Management and is working in the UK. The last son finished a M.Sc. in Environmental Engineering/MBA in Imperial College, is in the city in London managing hedge funds and is a fashion designer. I have a son who is an Architect; he is married and stays in the UK with his wife. My daughter is a lawyer, specializing in Oil and Gas having completed her M.Sc. degree in Oil and Gas from Dundee University, Scotland - works in France but lives in London.

Here are our offspring, but ***could Etteh and Aro make EAP a family business?*** The answer is NO from the records above.

Here is how God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform for EAP: Etteh Aro & Partners currently has five (5) Partners and three (3) Associate Partners.

Our firm, Etteh Aro & Partners, has been given a life of its own by the creator Himself. The spirit of the partnership has been inculcated in the lives of many who have come under it. Some have decided to stay to continue the work that we started, even though they do not bear our names.

They have been saddled with the task of re-branding Etteh Aro & Partners to ensure that the new “Etteh Aro” would address all the pitfalls of Etteh Aro & Partners and make it an all inclusive company. I have advised them to make Etteh Aro an International company, to make Africa its primary target, to target out-sourcing, to engage in Research and Development to be able to come up with new ways of giving client value for money. I have enjoined them that the pursuit of excellence and the integrity of EAP must not be compromised. I sincerely believe that Etteh Aro would outlive both of us.

Today, there are competing demands for the available funds and the days of one man practice is virtually over. Excellence and economy in service delivery is taking precedence. I believe that God who put late Lawrence and I together to start the good work will ensure that the vision is realized. The new Etteh Aro is well equipped to cope in the present trend. Late Lawrence and I have run a good race, I have handed over the baton to trusted young men and women but I must encourage them to run a good race and keep the flag flying high.

Thank you for your attention.

Rev. Engr. E. I. I. Etteh OFR