

# Phillip Emeagwali: Icon or Con Man?

Contributed by Jonathan Elendu  
Thursday, 28 July 2005  
Last Updated Monday, 15 August 2005

In 1987, the University of Michigan accepted him as a pre-candidate doctoral student of the College of Engineering. Two years later, he won the prestigious Gordon Bell Prize for his work in super computing. Using more than sixty-five thousand processors, he programmed "the connection machine to compute 3.1 billion calculations per second&hellip;to simulate oil reservoirs."

Nigerians heard of this amazing feat by one of their own and celebrated it. We have heard other wonderful stories about Phillip Emeagwali, the Nigerian born computer scientist. Many wonderful things have been written about him in the media, especially the Internet. CNN has been quoted as calling him one of the fathers of the Internet. Only problem with that claim is that nobody knows which anchor or reporter and on what show Emeagwali was described as one of the fathers of the Internet.

Genuine stories about Phillip

Emeagwali have not garnered the same level of publicity. These include his suit against the University of Michigan for refusing to award him a doctorate degree in super computing or engineering. On the morning of Friday, 1 August 1991, Emeagwali had a meeting with Erdogan Gulari, the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the College of Engineering. At the said meeting Gulari told Emeagwali that for him to be considered for a PhD, he had to submit his dissertation by 1 October 1991. This was in addition to other requirements. Emeagwali agreed to this condition. Sometime in the middle of 1992, Emeagwali submitted his dissertation.

Emeagwali's dissertation was reviewed by a panel which comprised of people within the University of Michigan and some external academics. They concluded that Emeagwali's work did not merit a Ph.D. In 1996, he sued the University, alleging racial discrimination. The suit was summarily dismissed. In October 1999, Emeagwali appealed and the Michigan Court of Appeals which comprised of William B. Murphy, Donald E. Holbrook, J., and Hilda R. Gage, concurred with the lower court and dismissed his appeal.

Phillip

Emeagwali has been described by some websites as one of the most popular of Africans. He is ranked in achievement and popularity with the likes of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Nelson Mandela. Yet, some writers have suggested that these claims are misleading and dubious. Why? Most of these websites crediting Emeagwali with these glowing tributes are owned by him, or his wife.

In an

interview with one Mary Bellis, Emeagwali claims to have been homeless from 1967-1970. While that claim is true, he fails to mention that millions of other Nigerians from the East were homeless too, as the area was a war zone at the time. There are many lingering questions which this reporter wants answered. Is Emeagwali an icon of his time, or a con man who has engaged in a very sophisticated public relations campaign that has been sustained for over a decade?

We

contacted Phillip Emeagwali's office and emailed Dr. Donita Brown, who is claimed to be a curator on one of the Emeagwali web sites. Our calls to "Emeagwali research" were answered by a lady who promised to forward

our calls to him. And Dr. Brown responded to our email as follows:

Jonathan:

I am sorry we did not respond to your previous emails. Some emails get misdirected or filtered by our anti-spam software.

He prefers that we not forward interview requests to him. He only gives about one African-media interview in five years and has not travelled to Africa in 18 years.

The URLs below contain 250 pages of his answers to FAIQs (Frequently Asked Interview Questions) regarding his scientific work and his thoughts on contemporary issues.

We plan a major update (100 additional pages) in late September 2005. Best wishes on your story.

Regards,  
Webmaster,  
emeagwali.com

As a rule we, at Elendureports.com, do not take excerpts from answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) in lieu of an interview. However, the email reproduced verbatim, except for the web links, has raised more questions than it answered.

Emeagwali has described himself as "the Bill Gates of Africa," yet he has not set foot on African soil in eighteen years. The real Bill Gates has spent more time in Africa in the past twenty years than Emeagwali. How have Africa and its diverse population benefited from Emeagwali's success? The email response states that he grants one interview every five years to an African media. While the answer may be true, albeit preposterous, it suggests the mindset of an individual who has a bloated estimate of his own worth.

Claims of Emeagwali holding patents to forty-one inventions are splashed on his websites. We searched for these patents at the appropriate places and came up with nothing to corroborate those claims. Where are these patents registered? Who in the scientific community is aware of these inventions? Could it be that the computer on which I am writing this story was invented by my tribesman and I don't know? "I have expertise in five different fields which helps me to easily understand the analogy between my scientific problems and those occurring in nature. First, I identify an analogous problem in nature and borrow from it. It is smarter to borrow from nature than to reinvent the wheels." What are these five areas of expertise?

If the University of Michigan did not award Phillip Emeagwali a Ph.D., then where did he obtain his doctorate degree? In the same interview with Mary Bellis he claims to work with a fifty-five million dollar computer. Where does Emeagwali practice his trade? "Today, I have access to a \$55 million super computer while many African scientists do not have access to a personal computer. The greater opportunity enabled me to make important discoveries and inventions" he told Mary Bellis.

Emeagwali has been married to Dale Emeagwali since 1981. Is Dale Emeagwali the same person as Dr. Donita Brown? Our research indicates that Donita Brown is Dale Emeagwali. Isn't it curious that while she is

called Dale Emeagwali on their family website, she is called Donita Brown other websites registered either by herself, or her husband, Phillip? Certainly none of these websites were registered before 1981. When asked if Donita Brown, the lady we spoke to in Emeagwali's office told us she did not Phillip Emeagwali's relationship with Donita Brown. Pray, this person works in Emeagwali's office and knows Donita Brown! The natural question is why does Emeagwali's wife have two identities?

We

were also curious to find out how a man who claims to love Africa and its people so much, and have given speeches on the "brain drain" syndrome proudly exhibit as one of his greatest achievements, the thirty-five members of his immediate and extended families he relocated to America. There are no records to indicate that these people went back to Africa after their studies. From all available records, Emeagwali's five siblings live in the United States as do his parents. Yet, the man has no qualms giving speeches on the harmful effects of "brain drain" on the continent of Africa and what can be done to stem the tide.

Even more curious is that a man, who positions himself as a serious scientist, has a website dedicated to showing off his family photos, yet there is no website dedicated to showing his inventions. Nobody should quarrel with a man who wants to spend time and resources showing off his wardrobe, wife, and son. However, other writers have suggested that such behavior is at odds with the characteristics of a serious-minded scientist. Is Philip Emeagwali a showman, who has set up virtual edifices to bolster his ego, or a scientist with too much time on his hands?

A critic of Emeagwali, Chioma K. Ezeilo in a piece entitled, "Self-Promotion and Self-Authentication&hellip;," spoke to Emeagwali's showmanship: "I understand that Hollywood stars and musicians and others of that ilk have what they term their official website, where fans can read all about them and learn what these individuals have accomplished professionally&hellip;Philip Emeagwali is not a celebrity by any stretch of the imagination, so I wonder why he believes it necessary to build this online shrine to himself." But she was more concerned about another matter, as she states, "The thing that bothered me was the outright lies, half-truths, and numerous unsubstantiated claims that permeated the website." Elendureports.com tried to contact Chioma K. Ezeilo, but our efforts yielded no fruit. Mary Bellis did not respond to our request for interview before press time.

Since we published our story on Prof Gabriel Oyibo, we have been inundated with emails asking all kinds of questions about this gentleman. There have also been questions about Nigerians who are supposed to be very accomplished, yet, making fraudulent claims that astonish their colleagues and contemporaries. While a fair minded person would be inclined to believe that the jury is still out on Phillip Emeagawli and his accomplishments, there is a question that needs to be asked and answered: Is it greed, ego, criminal ignorance, or in-built self destructive tendencies that lead our people to make claims that cannot be substantiated easily?

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