

“Your opportunities depend on where you were born.”

An interview with Angelo Kitio (23) from Cameroon and Emmanuel Okon (32) from Nigeria originally held by Maike Waldbroel and published in the Bonner General-Anzeiger in German language.

Both have completed master’s degrees—Kitio at the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences of Rwanda and Okon at the equivalent institution in Senegal. There are five such centers in all, based in various African countries. Kitio and Okon are part of the second intake for the **YAM program**. Since 2022, three exceptionally talented early-career researchers from Africa (the “Young African Mathematicians”) each year have been invited by the Hausdorff Center for Mathematics at the University of Bonn to spend (currently) four months working here on their research projects. In the process, they benefit from the networks fostered by their fellow mathematicians in Bonn and from the close working relationship between the University’s mathematical institutes and the Max Planck Institute for Mathematics within the Cluster of Excellence.

What did the two of you expect from your trip to Bonn?

Kitio: I mainly wanted to see for myself how mathematicians work in Europe, and particularly in Germany, and whether there are any differences.

Okon: I wanted to learn even more about mathematics. We don’t have that many mathematicians where we come from, whereas there’s a long tradition of the subject in Europe. I also wanted to find out what other opportunities I had to keep on developing. The selection process was in four stages and was really quite tough to get through successfully!

What experience have you gained?

Okon: I’ve met researchers from all over the world at the Max Planck Institute, and the symposium for Bonn’s mathematicians in the fall taught me a lot. It was the first time I’ve been able to present my research to so many people from the math community. Many of them asked some very perceptive questions, which are now helping me to improve my research.

Kitio: I think the way people collaborate here is great: the research groups even eat together at lunchtime.

How have you benefited from your time in Bonn?

Kitio: I’ve learned how I can express myself better mathematically, because I had daily meetings with my supervisor and his research group and had to explain everything I’d been doing.

Okon: That’s true! My time here has made me better at pursuing my goals. I’ve also been in a new place, in Europe, where I had some fantastic experiences. One thing has become clear to me, however: many of your opportunities depend on where you were born.

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What would be your tips for people following in your footsteps on the program?

Kitio: You should be prepared to work hard. Not just on your research, but by taking part in seminars, being proactive, contributing and being active in order to take as much as possible on board. And I really liked the city: the center is so beautiful!

What aspects of the program could be improved?

Kitio: It should be longer, so that you could be here for six or nine months, for instance. In its current form, there's not enough time to do your work and get your results. If it were longer, there would also be scope for running workshops, and at the start you could devote all your time to attending seminars yourself and getting to know your new surroundings.

Okon: Much of the admin here in Germany is hard for people from abroad to get their head round. Right from opening a bank account.

What's next for you two?

Kitio: A doctorate in the US.

Okon: I'd like to become a better mathematician and hope I'll be able to stay in Germany to do a doctorate in Bonn. In the long term, I want to set up a center for mathematics in my home country—with a similar environment to the one in Bonn.

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