



## The ALBA Diversity Podcast

### Season 1- Episode 1

#### Ibukun Akinrinade - Pursuing your dreams: a career in neuroscience

##### Speaker Key:

SM Shruti Muralidhar (Podcast host)

IA Ibukun Akinrinade (Guest)

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SM Hello, and welcome to the ALBA Diversity Podcast, an ALBA Network undertaking to profile and highlight diverse and immigrant neuroscientists. The ALBA Network aims to promote equity and diversity in the brain sciences. We talk to neuroscientists across positions, career paths and backgrounds to better understand their personal journeys.

We showcase the grit and determination it takes to overcome hurdles as part of underrepresented or minority groups. We talk about what keeps them going as individuals and as neuroscientists in today's world.

IA Hi, I'm Ibukun Akinrinade. I just finished my PhD programme from Instituto Gulbenkian de Ciencia, and I'm currently about to start a postdoc in the University of Calgary in Prof. Rui Oliveira's Lab. I studied social neuroscience. I looked at the role of oxytocin in social information use during traits perception in zebrafish.

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SM How did you get to neuroscience? How did you first start thinking about neurons and brains? Tell us a little bit about your journey.

IA I actually learnt my Master's programme in Nigeria. My supervisor, then, his name is Professor Caxton-Martins. He was a professor in the University of Ife in Nigeria. And then upon retirement he was called on by my university in Ilorin, then, to start up a postgraduate programme in anatomy. He actually got me into research in general. And then during the course work, he then introduced neuroscience. Unfortunately, at that time, I didn't work on neuroscience for my thesis, but I had started developing interest.

And then at the end of my Master's programme, I decided that I would love to pursue a career in neuroscience, that is, go for my PhD and then expand in my knowledge of neuroscience. At the time of my Master's programme, I was working with rats. But then during my PhD programme in Portugal with Professor Rui Oliveira, that was when I started working with zebrafish.

I also belong to a charity organisation, TREND in Africa, who are trying to promote



the use of other simpler models like *Drosophila*, zebrafish or *C. elegans*, because of how cost effective they are. In my case, it was perfect because Gulbenkian Institute Professor Rui is working with zebrafish, so it was perfect for me to explore that option of using zebrafish. Of course, they are good social organisms, so it was just perfect.

At the time I started my PhD programme, I already decided I wanted to study the brain, to work on neuroscience. But what really increased my knowledge, aside from the interest I developed with my former supervisor, was when I went for the TReND workshop that I mentioned earlier. Basically, it's an intensive workshop, a three-week workshop. The goal of the workshop is to intimate students into the practical view of neuroscience and molecular biology because there's been a wide gap in science in general, and then in neuroscience it's even worse.

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The target of the organisation was to try to increase the knowledge of students from different parts of Africa. People are selected to attend this workshop and they go through these three weeks that cut across different fields, from behaviour, to electrophysiology, to molecular biology. They try to develop practical knowledge. It's intensive because it's practical based, that was my first time of really being exposed to all these cool techniques. TReND in Africa workshop, it was organised in Uganda.

What they do is they get equipment from different universities or institutes and then they try to set up a lab there, so the lab in which they set up to be used by scientists in that university. It's a way of developing research in that region. And, of course, it skyrocketed my interest in neuroscience. Also, that year, I got a grant to visit a lab in France, where I then developed my knowledge in terms of technical skills.

I looked at the role of stress systems in addiction. And then subsequently, I enrolled in the PhD programme in Portugal to study the role of oxytocin in social information use during traits perception.

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SM Please correct me if you feel otherwise. But I always feel neuroscience is something that we get into because of techniques. I got into neuroscience because I thought slice electrophysiology was fascinating. I said, oh my God, you can take a glass pipette and you can poke a cell and you can see exactly single action potential.

IA For my own story, it was really looking at the behaviour of the organism and then being able to assess the brain to see what regions are responsible for such behaviours. I think for me, it was really fascinating.

SM Do you have someone that you consider to be a role model or a mentor? And bear in mind, of course, they don't have to be a scientist and they don't have to be related to science. But anybody in your life who you think has influenced you or is influencing you?

IA In the aspect of science, I have a mentor, and she happens to be the co-founder



of the organisation that I've been talking about. Her name is Lucia Prieto Godino. She's currently a principal investigator in the Francis Crick Institute. At the time she started the TReND organisation, she was actually a PhD student. She went for this workshop in [unclear]. While attending that workshop, she met a participant who happens to be Nigerian, and then they got discussing.

And then he started talking to her about the challenges that is being faced by Africans in terms of research, specifically neuroscience research. And that spurred that interest in trying to develop an organisation where they can bring this cool equipment that are really not being used any longer in the Western world. To bring it to Africa to then try to reutilise this equipment by people that really crave for such knowledge. That was what brought about TReND in Africa.

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She happens to be really cool, learning about her story. As a PhD student, it's really not easy to try to conceive the idea. Not only to conceive the idea, but also to bring it into fruition, it's really not easy as a PhD student. You're focusing on your research, I can imagine, it's really not easy. You're trying to get results because you want the PhD, you want to defend. Having been able to conceive the idea and bring it to reality, it took a lot of guts.

And then, of course, being able to cut across the bureaucratic process of getting the equipment to Africa, setting it up and then organising a workshop, it took a lot of perseverance, patience, and really, those were the things I admired in her. And not just during the workshop, even after the workshop, she kept in contact with us and tried as much as possible to set people up.

Some of the alumni from the workshop, if they need reference letters or if they need advice on how to write the specific research proposal, basically, she's always there to render assistance whenever she can. It's with those qualities that I see her as my mentor. In terms of my scientific career, she's my mother. And then in terms of my personal life, my mother-in-law is my mother. Why do I say so? She's an amazing person. I remember when I wanted to go to France to go for this one year research, I already had my son and he was barely a year old.

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I was torn between decisions, what do I do? Do I stay? Do I go? And her being an academician, she talked to me and she said, pursue your dream. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Go for it. Your son will be proud of you. Not just the advice, she also decided to take care of my boy during the period. And yes, she's been super supportive. I'm quite lucky in terms of support from my family. My parents, also my siblings and my husband's family have all been supportive.

SM These are the kind of things that I feel people don't fully understand. They just say, yes, you have somebody to take care of your son, go, you can do what you want. But the emotional, again...

IA Yes, it's not easy. I struggled a lot focusing. I felt the guilty trip. I felt guilty, like, how can I leave my son and then go pursue my career?

SM No, but your mother-in-law made it possible for you. I'm sure her determination,



her view of the future, I think that's the unique bit. She can see you being a PI back in Nigeria. And I think she understood what she has to do and her role in it. And that's very amazing. Very few people [inaudible]. You said she was also an academician?

IA Yes. She was a lecturer. She was a college professor.

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SM The reason why we're doing this series is to highlight people who are part of diverse groups and who are part of immigrant groups or minority groups. What we want to do is to understand a little more closely, the experiences that people from diverse groups have, and maybe use that a little bit to see how we can improve the general culture of diversity and inclusivity in neuroscience.

I don't need to explain to anybody, you're clearly a part of an underrepresented group and not in one way. Not just the fact that you're from Africa, but the fact that you are a woman. How do you feel about this? Do you have any incidence where it has played a role and you think it helped you or it didn't help you so much?

IA Coming as an African descent, the first thing that comes to my mind is the fact that we have had limited resources in research. And that was what actually spurred my interest in trying to acquire more knowledge to then be able to give back as much as I can. Before I moved out of Africa, I never thought about being a minority. It didn't come suddenly. I think I gradually realised I was of a minority group when I went to France, and also coupled with the fact that I could not speak the language fluently.

I had basic knowledge of French in school, so I could get by a bit, but then when it comes to making real lengthy conversations, I really struggled. But I have to say that because of all I had to go through, I really didn't dwell on my limitations. If I'm a minority, I would see this as a challenge. I would see this as a motivating factor for me so that I would be able to accomplish what I seek. That was my...

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SM Thought process.

IA Exactly.

SM I hear you. It's pretty much, I think, what all minority groups do, if you think about it.

IA It can be depressing, right?

SM Yes, and that's how we overcome our immediate problems. I have a feeling that's ingrained in us probably as part of our culture, that you cannot look at problems as problems. You have to look at them as stepping stones.

IA As challenges.

SM Yes, as challenges.

IA Exactly, that you overcome. You talked about being a woman in neuroscience.



It's even more than neuroscience, being a woman in science or in research in general, it's a big challenge. In my case, I was already with a child. And I had to make the sacrifice of leaving my child for a while to acquire more knowledge. And, in fact, the way science is, it's even more difficult for women in neuroscience or in science, because there's this mindset that after a phase of your career, for you to transition to the next phase, you need to leave your location.

And imagine someone who has roots in that location, you've got family, then you have to leave your family to another location in order to increase your knowledge. What if you don't have the support of your family? In my case, I was very fortunate to have a very supportive husband. He joined me in Portugal, where I pursued my PhD programme. He had to leave his job to support me in this scientific part. And then now, as he tried to establish himself in Portugal, we had to move again from Portugal to Canada. Imagine if I didn't have a supportive husband.

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I know of some women that cannot do this. As a woman in science, it's really, really difficult and that's why we have fewer and fewer women. At a time, during my PhD programme, I was really down. I was like, can I do this? Can I reach this goal that I've set for myself? And then I had to think again of my kids because they've always been my motivation.

I could have decided to be a stay-at-home mum and be a good stay-at-home mum. But then I decided to pursue this career, so I should be good at what I'm doing. At the end, I would be a good role model for them.

SM

Especially people living in the West, in the North, who have all of these accessible universities and laboratories and science and research, I think they do tend to take it for granted more than, I guess, you and me. We do because we know the value of... And we know it not just in money, we know it in our hard work and in all the sacrifices that we have to make.

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IA

Yes. I had this experience when I went for a course in another country, I was asked a question by a woman who happens to be in charge of the programme around there. She was like, wow, you're in this PhD programme, that's really good. We usually have applications from people from your part of the world and we always have this doubt if we can admit them. Basically, she was trying to say, they weren't sure if people from Africa can cope with the programme there. And the time she asked that, it was my first experience.

I just gave a simple response like, yes, we are able to strive, to survive, to understand. Afterwards, I started processing the question that, wow, this is a bigger question. It opens up the question of inclusiveness in science. The main problem, what I see is the gap. There is this huge gap in science because of the limited resources available in this developing countries. There are people with incredible minds, beautiful minds, highly intelligent and skilful people, highly innovative people but with limited resources.

And if they still have this fear of how we will survive, then the gap will still exist. The beauty of science is the coming together of people from diverse



backgrounds, bringing knowledge from their various backgrounds and fields, and creating something beautiful called scientific research, scientific ideas, scientific innovation. As long as that is not in place, I don't think we would have these innovations that comes from science, from scientific research. We should have more inclusivity. And it comes with this kind of interviews, this kind of discussions.

SM You're absolutely right. That is the reason why ALBA Diversity Podcast exists. And that's the reason why I'm talking to you. I'm so glad you brought that out. I guess the last thing I have is the simpler one. You're a mother, you're a scientist, you do so many things. Academia is horrible for work-life balance, but it seems like you have the balance. I'm going to ask you for your tips and tricks. How do you do it? How do you balance work and life?

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IA For me, I just live it one day at a time.

SM Very wise words.

IA And why do I do this? Because if I focus on only the problems or the challenges, I will be overwhelmed. At that time, it was really challenging because I had to manage my son, I had to manage classes because I had six months of classes in which sometimes we have to move away from our location, elsewhere we have retreats. If I had thought about all those I have to pass through, I probably would not have this PhD.

I probably will just stay back at home and be contented with what I have. If I have to think about all the challenges I will face and overcome, I wouldn't move. But then at least now I'm here. The next step is to try to see how to settle down.

SM Thank you for listening to this episode of the ALBA Diversity Podcast. To know more about The ALBA Network and its activities to promote equity and diversity in the brain sciences, please visit [alba.network](http://alba.network). You can also register as a member for free and take full advantage of the network's resources. For more details, follow the Twitter handle [@network\\_alba](https://twitter.com/network_alba), or [AlbaNetBrain](https://www.facebook.com/AlbaNetBrain) on Facebook.

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