

EDITORIAL

In Memoriam: Dr Christopher Gbelokoto Okojie

Friday Okonofua

Dr Christopher Gbelokoto Okojie, who died on October 7, 2006 at the age of 86 years, was one of the most distinguished medical doctors in Nigeria in the second half of the twentieth century. He graduated from the medical school in 1947, and immediately began a career in rural medical practice two years later. He founded the pioneer private medical Centre in Esanland, the Zuma Memorial Hospital on March 27, 1950, which was the main medical centre available to the people of the area for the subsequent 40 years.

As the proprietor of this hospital, Dr Christopher Okojie treated the most bizarre medical conditions; provided antenatal, delivery, postnatal and family planning services to rural women; established a pioneer orphanage home for abandoned children; trained several generations of nurses and midwives; and offered a channel through which medical students from various Nigerian Universities gained experience in rural medical practice. Indeed, the editor of this journal was born at the Zuma Memorial Hospital and delivered by the great sage himself in mid-1950. It was in recognition of his prowess as a rural medical practitioner, that the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) offered him the

honorary membership of FIGO in 1996. In 2003, he was again honored by FIGO with the Distinguished Community Service Award, an honor reserved for obstetricians and gynecologists around the world who have demonstrated great passion and commitment in the provision of clinical care to neglected populations. Indeed, Dr Christopher Okojie was the first Nigerian to receive this prestigious award.

Dr Christopher Okojie was past President of the Nigerian Medical Association and Past Secretary of Health (Minister of Health) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He was a fellow of the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria, a fellow of the International College of Surgeons and a member of the Population Council of New York, USA. He led a principled and simple life dedicated to the service of the people. He never wavered in his determination to assist the poor and to advice young men and women, not only in the health-related professions but also in other spheres of life. Thus, he was a role model, mentor and adviser to successive generations of Nigerian doctors, a celebrated humanist, philanthropist, trail blazer, advocate for the masses and a pacifist.

Apart from his great achievements in the medical profession, Dr Christopher Okojie excelled as a writer, anthropologist, defender of the causes of his native Esan people, and a veritable lexicologist. Surely, it will be difficult to get such a Nigerian doctor of so many parts so soon in Nigeria. If Dr Christopher Okojie had lived in other parts of the world, he would be revered in perpetuity as a hero, a sage and even a saint.

In recognition of the achievements of this celebrated Nigerian doctor, the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Medicine and Biomedical Research* has decided to immortalize his name, so that successive generations of Nigerian doctors will learn from his chosen path of wisdom and decide to mirror their lives after the examples he has set. We therefore decided it was appropriate to carry the full-length funeral oration delivered by Professor Abhulimen Richard Anao at the time of his burial. Professor Anao is the immediate past Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin,

himself a visionary, who achieved so much as Vice-Chancellor of Nigeria's foremost University. His succinct and eloquent narration of the life of Dr Okojie is a living testimony of the worth of the man who worked so hard in his lifetime to lift the image of the medical profession and to protect the lives of men and women in disadvantaged circumstances.

***May his gentle soul rest in perfect peace,
Amen.***



**A FAREWELL TRIBUTE TO
DR. CHRISTOPHER GBELOKOTO OKOJIE**

Dr Christopher Gbelokoto Okojie:

April 9, 1920 – October 7, 2006

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Richard A. Anao

Here lies before us the earthly remains of a proud and princely hero; one who fought the battle of this life gallantly and triumphed; one who pioneered and blazed many trails; one whose light shone so brightly that all around him could see with it. Today, rather than mourn his demise, we call on you all to join us to celebrate the life of this great man who was our father, grandfather, great grandfather, uncle, brother, friend and compatriot – **Dr. XTO GBELOKOTO OKOJIE** - Officer of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; Licentiate of the School of Medicine, Nigeria; Fellow of the International College of Surgeons; Honorary Fellow of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics; Fellow of the Nigerian Medical Council; Doctor of Science (honoris causa), Ambrose Alli University; Founder and Chief Medical Director Zuma Memorial Hospital, Irrua; Former National President, Nigerian Medical Association; Patron, Association of General & Medical Practitioners of Nigeria; Former Member, Board of Trustees, National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria; Former member, Nigerian Medical Research Council; Council member, The Population Council; Former Associate Lecturer in Community Health, University of Lagos and University of Benin; Member of the Honorable order of contemporary Historians; Former member, Board of Governors, Nigerian Broadcasting corporation; Former member, Eastern Region of Nigeria Finance Corporation; Former Chairman, Western Nigeria Development Corporation; Former Minister, Works & Transport, Midwest Region of Nigeria; Former Honorable Secretary (Minister) of Health &

Social Services, Federal Republic of Nigeria; Former Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of Council, University of Ibadan; Former member Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital Management Board, Uselu, Benin; Former Deputy President, Boys Scout of Nigeria; Former Chairman, Nigeria Institute of Oil Palm Research, Benin; Chairman, Esan Orthography Committee; Former Chairman, Edo Economic Advisory Council; Writer; Historian; Anthropologist; Ethnographer; Lexicographer;

Born, April 9, 1920; called away from this earth on October 7, 2006. Dr. Christopher (a name he fondly abbreviated to "Xto") Gbelokoto Okojie, a dual Prince of Ujboha and Irrua kingdoms, was from all accounts an intellectual giant, a leading light not only in his primary discipline of Medicine, but also in the other fields of learning (History, Anthropology, Ethnography, Lexicography) in which he investigated and explored. He leaves behind for us a copious body of seminal knowledge, a solid foundation which future generations of researchers will find indispensable in their further inquiries. He was a devoted servant of his people, a compassionate provider for the poor and neglected people of this earth. Dr. Okojie comes in the same mould as the famed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, of blessed memory, who lived and died for the poor. He is no doubt one of the greatest sons of Esanland, (nay, of Nigeria) that have ever lived. Throughout his life, he displayed such love, compassion, commitment to his cause, energy, drive and zeal for knowledge that you do not often find endowed in one person.

Dr. Okojie definitely lived ahead of his time in the manner that he came to a recognition

of the health needs of his people and got himself immersed in the arduous task of bringing relief and succour to them, long before it became the concern of government to spread this basic necessity of life to all the nook and crannies of the land.

Dr. Xto Gbelokoto Okojie showed intellectual promise from an early age. Racing through his primary and secondary education in which he attended some of the best known schools of his time, including Government College, Ibadan (in which he studied with a government scholarship), he entered the Higher College, Yaba, in 1941, to undertake his premedical studies, this time with the sponsorship of another of our beloved, public-spirited and benevolent uncles, Prince M. E. Osobase of blessed memory, ("Pa Inono", as we all fondly called him). Dr. Okojie distinguished himself in the premedical class and entered the Medical School proper with a government scholarship in 1942, qualifying as a full medical doctor 5 years later. As expected, he took up employment with the Nigerian Medical Department immediately afterwards, but this was not for very long; for, Dr. Okojie took the momentous plunge, just 3 years later, of following the altruistic and patriotic dictates of his heart which has marked him out today as one of the most selfless and dedicated Nigerians of his time.

A few moving incidents, we are told, led to this momentous plunge. In 1949 during one of his visits home, he was invited to see a helpless pregnant woman in agony; she had been in labour for more than 24 hours in a small Missionary Hospital. The staff of the hospital had apparently run out of ideas how to manage the situation. Dr. Okojie had to do an emergency caesarean operation which saved both the woman and her baby. During the same visit, Dr. Okojie was again invited to see a postpartum lady bleeding on a road side, apparently abandoned by her people who believed that her condition was as a result of an offence she had committed against the 'gods'. Dr. Okojie took the Lady to a nearby

dispensary and saved her life. He also saw many cases of neglected scrotal hernia and hydrocele during his short stay at home.

These incidents stirred and agitated Dr. Okojie's compassionate mind, whereupon he decided there and then to resign his government appointment and return home to serve his people. Zuma Memorial Hospital, Irrua, was opened on 27th March 1950 in a private house. Thus, he went into this lofty venture with no money, no infrastructure, no water in flowing taps, no electricity or telephone; but with his doctor's certificate, abundant raw energy and dogged determination. The hospital ward comprised just 12 wooden beds. Thus began a fight which he waged throughout his life against the forces of ignorance, superstition and disease in Esanland.

This is the story of the humble beginning of a medical establishment which has now attained such maturity and fame that has attracted world-wide recognition and commendation. Today, the hospital has expanded to become one of the best-known private medical establishments in Nigeria, comprising some 120 beds; a Family Planning Clinic that attends to some 41, 000 women; an internationally recognized School of Midwifery that has turned out well over 1,100 Grade 1 Midwives; and an Orphanage which has parented over 70 abandoned children, some of whom have grown up to become professionals and breadwinners in their own right, among whom there is today a Veterinary Doctor, a Lawyer and a Reverend Gentleman.

The person who brought all this about has now passed into the great beyond. On this occasion, it would be inappropriate to mourn but simply to give gratitude to the Almighty Creator for his life, and to toast and celebrate this life. But, lest we forget, Dr. Okojie was not just a medical doctor who pioneered in health delivery to the poor and needy. His total dedication to his calling in the realm of practical medicine did not quench his quest for greater intellectual attainment. He found

time now and again to travel overseas to update himself in his profession. During one of such trips, in 1956, he took a specialist course in surgery at the postgraduate Medical College of New York University and bagged the most distinguished Fellowship of the International College of Surgeons (FICS). This course of study was pursued jointly with a Fulbright Fellowship and a Smith Mundt scholarship.

Yes, our father, brother and uncle was the very epitome of selflessness, public spiritedness, compassion and unflinching devotion to his people. However, besides all this, what is especially remarkable about this great man was the diversity of his academic interests. His academic brilliance and unquenchable quest for knowledge found expression in fields of learning which were very far removed from medicine. So versatile and multi-talented was Dr. Xto Gbelokoto Okojie that it is impossible to classify him in any one discipline or calling. His interests spanned medicine, history, anthropology, literature, linguistics and lexicography, a very rare combination indeed in any one person. So varied were the fields in which he applied his mental acuity! He belongs to that select group of persons who applied their innate intelligence, inquisitiveness, energy and passion for work to numerous fields of human endeavour. In this, he can be likened to such great achievers as Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519), who was a painter, a sculptor, an architect and an engineer, all rolled into one. Or Michelangelo (1475-1564) who was a poet, a painter, a sculptor and an architect, or the celebrated Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) who was a scientist and philosopher and a mathematician at the same time. These were men who recognized as our own Dr. Okojie did, that the gift of intellect, if one is endowed with it, can be applied to limitless areas of endeavour.

It is remarkable that Dr. Xto Gbelokoto Okojie, besides being a practising medical doctor of great distinction, also found time to research and document a history of Esan people as well as Esan customs and traditions;

the meanings of Esan names and proverbs, etc., in all of which he wrote books. In later years Dr. Okojie turned his attention to lexicography. Only recently in 2005, he published and launched an Esan Dictionary, the first attempt ever made to produce such a monumental work. He was also involved in the translation of church hymns into Esan Language. At the senile age of 86, only three months before his demise, (August 2006, precisely), when I visited him in the company of his brother Dr. Sonny Elimuan Okojie and his wife, Professor Christie Okojie, he was engaged in another book project, this time devoted to exploring the phenomenon of "reincarnation", a widely held belief among us Esan. This uncompleted work now invites any keen scholars among us to pick up from where he stopped

I have myself strained my own imagination envisaging how Dr. Okojie could have managed to combine such diverse and seemingly incompatible interests. I have tried to visualize a medical doctor and a consummate surgeon at that, who, having worked assiduously in the theatre during the day wielding scalpels, forceps or lancets, settles down in his study at night when he should be resting and recuperating, or perhaps revising his surgery books in preparation for the next day's theatre work; but instead, sits down to deciphering his historical jottings, trying to reconcile ambivalent and conflicting claims of oral depositions of elders, in order to produce an intelligible Esan ethnography and record Esan culture, customs and traditions. A unique combination of interests and virtues indeed!

In reading through his works one is struck with awe at the degree of his erudition and proficiency with the English Language. To illustrate the nature of the difficulties which he faced in his arduous research, consider the following sentence which is taken from one of his works, entitled **Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People**, first published in 1960, and later revised in 1994, at page xi.

Addressing his readers, he says:

"I would want you to know from the outset that you are about to wade through a mass of history, tradition and Esan way of life affecting a period of some 500 years. Collection of materials by **one proud to be born and bred in Esanland is easy - but the sifting of evidence, much of which is not only confused but unbelievably biased**, is not just difficult but requires something more than a **deep sense of responsibility: the fear of God**"

Yes, the fear of God!

In the forgoing, Dr. Okojie reveals three key aspects of his personality:

First, a person who is distinctly proud of his origins. Dr. Okojie was indeed intensely proud of his Esan roots. This showed up glaringly in his mien, and in his consummate passion to project, document and preserve the Esan Language for posterity.

Second, his painstaking and persevering nature. The book in question matured to the present state over a period of 40 years during which he traveled round every Esan town at least two times and conducted over 365 interviews. How many scholars of the present generation would have that amount of patience and perseverance?

Third, he possesses a deep sense of responsibility, which springs from his fear of God. This clearly attests to Dr. Okojie's unalloyed and unquestioning belief and faith in his Creator, to Whom he owes a duty to speak the truth always as he sees it. The authentic nature of his work, his claim to being an authoritative historian in his own right, is clearly attested to by the fact that the Foreword of this book was written by a well-known historian of the stature of Prof. S. O. Biobaku, who was a notable history scholar and one time Director of Yoruba Historical Research Scheme at the University of Ibadan. In 1959, Dr. Okojie was admitted to Membership of the

ORDER OF CONTEMPORARY HONORABLE HISTORIANS (by Time Magazine).

The above three traits very appropriately sum up Dr. Okojie's personality. As a proud and patriotic son of Esanland he devoted himself for 56 years to rendering selfless service to the poor and needy; yet, also found time to collect and record a history and anthropology which would for all time portray what we really are Esans people, how we came to be, and what we can legitimately aspire to become in the general scheme of things, in this nation and as citizens of the world.

Dr. Okojie was aware of the seminal nature of his historical and anthropological endeavours and despite his endless and painstaking toils, leaves room for future contributions by scholars who would modify or complement his findings. This can be seen from another excerpt from the same work earlier referred to. He says at page xix.

"I am only constructing a ladder of encouragement with which future literary brains amongst us Esan will rise to greater heights; you add another rung to this ladder and you will be doing your fatherland and country infinite service".

Dr. Okojie was of course the archetypical scholar who expected that seminal works such as his always tended to generate controversies, and like the scholar that he was, he did not shirk this, but instead he invited it. At page xiv of his book, he states:

"For months after the publication of this work I expect an avalanche of historical fireworks! I expect abuses, praises and arguments - if fact the hornets nest will be thoroughly stirred but in the midst of this our people will ask more questions about their origin, traditions and custom which were being indiscriminately labeled as PRIMITIVE and better forgotten. If I succeed in creating that amount of stimulus and self examination I will consider my labour in the last forty years amply rewarded."

Ladies and gentlemen, such was the modesty and openness of this man who has now departed from us.

But, we may well ask: why do we deem it necessary to survey Dr. Okojie's life, as we are doing here? Is it just to sing his praises, to eulogise him for his great achievements, or is it for the pride of those of us that claim to be his relations? No, it is none of these. It is simply to hoist aloft for all to see, we the living, the virtues of goodness and diligence, of patriotism and devotion, of compassion and selflessness, so that we can all try to follow his footsteps. Only through such emulation can we have derived full benefit from Dr. Okojie's life. Indeed the likes of Dr. Okojie provide us a unique opportunity to examine our own lives in order to recognize those aspects in which we can learn from the departed and take steps to reposition our own lives. His life indeed provides such immense references as can be beneficial to us all in such a soul searching exercise.

In the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, that great American poet, who lived between 1807 and 1882:

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime.
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time
Let us, then, be up and doing
With a heart for any fate
Still achieving, still pursuing
Learn to labour and to wait".

Our father, brother, uncle, devoted his entire working life from 1950 to 2006 (56 years) to serving humanity, ministering onto their health needs as well as cultivating their cultural awareness without demanding or expecting any earthly reward for his services. He left indelible footprints on the sands of time. We should try to be motivated by such an example of nobility and selflessness! We will of course all feel his absence from our midst, for it is truly a great loss. Especially so for us the members of his family. To us, our pillar of support and beacon of light has been uprooted.

As I reminisced over this great life I wrote down a poem which I will now read:

Ode to Dr. Xto Gbelokoto Okojie

The great Iroko has fallen,
It now lies prostrate on the ground,
The stanchion on which we all leaned.
What shall become of the lesser trees of the forest,
The ferns, the shrubs, the creepers,
Which sheltered erstwhile in its folds?

Our great sage has passed away
Taking with him his peerless wisdom,
And his endless quest for knowledge.
We'll certainly miss him, but we will not mourn;
We'll feel his loss, but not cry.
Instead, we'll rejoice that he lived among us,
A glorious and fulfilled life,
That enriched each one of us,
And blazed the trail we now must follow.

We will give praise and glory to the Lord
Who gave him to use the Esan people,
And made him a citizen of the world.
We will thank the Lord who endowed him
So loftily, from which fountain
He gave abundantly to humanity;
From which his light shone with rare brilliance,
A light that will continue to illuminate,
Long after it was extinguished.
And so to you our beloved sage,
Our devoted father and uncle,
As you depart this toilsome earth,
As you give up your mortal cloak,
Which every one must do in turn
In obedience to the Will of God
Remember what you always taught us
That there is another life, not here.
That all does not end on earth.

May the beautiful seeds you sowed
Now blossom forth with pleasant fruits
For your delight in the worlds beyond.
As you savour God's rich blessings,
As you bask in the resplendence of heavenly light
Remember to give praise and glory to Him
Whose love and grace gave you life.

Now, go forth and stride with vigour
Along the path which leads to Paradise
We pray the Lord will open to you
The gates to His eternal Kingdom.
Where there's no more death,
No pain, and no sorrow;
Where all is peace and bliss!

Amen!