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**A LIBRARY BURNT DOWN TO THE GROUND: LIFE AND TIMES OF VENERABLE
PROFESSOR GABRIEL ADEMOLA OYEDEJI**

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An African writer, historian and ethnologist; Amadou Hampate Ba, a Malian, opined before UNESCO in 1960 that whenever an old man dies, a library burns down to the ground, when a woman dies, a school burns down to the ground, and when a child dies, a church, mosque or a synagogue respectively, burns down to the ground. The import of this was to draw the attention of UNESCO to the damages done to African oral literature whenever death struck and a person dies.

This assertion best projects the glorious passage of an eminent and erudite scholar who was one of the best in his generation, the **Venerable Gabriel Ademola Ajagbe OYEDEJI**, in whose honour this piece is put up.



Pa Ven. Prof. Gabriel Ademola Oyedeji

Birth/Early Life

Though there was no record of his exact birth date, however available information put his birth to be early/mid 1930s. He was a born blue blood, into the royal family of Adebomi of Iyoro's compound, Ido -Osun, Egbedore Local government area in present day, Osun State, Nigeria. His father was Late Pa Joseph Adekojo Oyedeji while his mother was late Madam Esther Tenidolorun Alake Oyedeji.

Professor Oyedeji cherished his royal lineage so much that he once told me that of all his achievements, being a Prince is what he cherished most, because according to him, anyone can become a professor but it is only God that pre- determines who is a prince.

Education

Young Ademola's foray into western education was influenced by two of his uncles, late Simeon Adeleke Faramade and late Barrister Adebomi. Both had tremendous impacts in his enrolment into St. Paul's primary school, Ido Osun where he started his elementary education. He later attended United Central Anglican primary school, Ilobu. This was because at St. Paul's primary school no pupil can go beyond primary three. It was this United Central Anglican School that served Ilobu, Ido-Osun, Okinni, Erin Osun, and its environs and any pupil that was interested in completing his elementary education had to transit.

He thereafter attended the famous Igbobi Boys High School, Lagos; one of the prominent and prestigious secondary schools

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of note then. Ademola completed his secondary education in flying colours. His brilliant performance led to his having a brief stint as a teacher at Methodist Boys High school, Lagos in 1964. His thirst for further education pushed him to attend Nigeria's premier University, University of Ibadan where he obtained his baccalaureate degree in Medicine and Surgery.

As was common in those years, he proceeded to the University of Liverpool in pursuit of the Golden Fleece in 1973, where he was awarded the prestigious Cicely-Williams Prize for his distinguished work in Tropical Paediatrics. This award was remarkable and noteworthy because he was the first African and Nigerian to achieve the feat. Cicely-Williams was a renowned tropical and community pediatrician who discovered kwashiorkor in Nigeria. She personally presented this award to Professor Gabriel Ademola Oyediji in 1974. It was in Liverpool that Professor Oyediji went through the crucible that eventually crowned him as a Consultant Paediatrician.

Work and Achievements

Baba's work ethics is like that of a trojan. It will not be an over exaggeration to say that more than 80 percent of his life had been work as shown by the chronology of his achievements. I often humorously remark that if I could achieve a quarter of what he was able to achieve I will 'buga' everyone around, because it is rare for a mere mortal to be great like him and yet humble, humane, generous and God fearing.

Baba as I fondly call him was a highly decorated scholar, home and abroad and a true polymath whose knowledge is broad based. His prowess in other fields of knowledge is awesome and deep. Baba's is a man of the arts and culture aside writing his knowledge and skills in Ewi, Ijala, rara sisun (forms of Yoruba oral poetry), Bata, and his involvement in cultural groups working with Yemi Elebuibon and Professor 'Wande Abimbola attested to this. Somewhat, I find it difficult to refer to this great man in the past tense. I hope you will bear with me.

Prof. has always been very brave, which made him served in the Nigeria Army during the Biafran war. His foray into the academia started in 1978 when he joined the services of the then University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife as Lecturer 1 and as Honourary Consultant at the Teaching Hospital. He rose through the ranks and was pronounced a Professor of Paediatrics and Child Health in 1989, making him the first indigenous Professor of Paediatrics and child Health in the annals of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

His work ethics, dedication to duty, attention to details and commitments made him to serve in different capacities as Head of Department for many years, Chairman, Medical Advisory Council of the teaching hospital, and Provost of the University's College of Health Sciences for two terms. He worked tirelessly till he retired in September 2008, after thirty years, one month and eleven days of active and unbroken service.

Baba's leadership acumen was brought to the fore when he was elected Provost of the College of Health Sciences for two tenures. One can be tested to disagree with the general consensus that leaders and managers are not born but cultivated, when you see the ways and manners, he managed people and resources efficiently and effortlessly. Either at Obafemi Awolowo University and its Teaching Hospital, as Chairman, Christian Health Association of Nigeria with the headquarters in Jos or at the Diocesan level or when he joined the services of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso after retirement and was made the Dean of Faculty of Clinical Sciences, among several others, Baba was committed to high ethical standards, leaving behind unblemished records. In all, his integrity and values were constant, regardless of the situation or circumstances he found himself.

Professor Oyediji was a builder of men and a compassionate professional. He was teacher of teachers, professor of professors and of professors. He was involved in many laudable projects, programmes, mentorship/training in academia, medical

practice and in the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, Scripture Union and the Community.

As his Research Assistant/Private Secretary and confidant of many years, describing Baba Oyedeji through the lens of medical practice/academia alone will be limiting his infinite capacity to build men and women of substance. As one of his disciples, I can attest to the fact that it is impossible to encounter Prof. and remain the same thereafter. His dominant traits are a challenge to my generation. Baba's intellectual capacity is seen when there were high level presentations. He would never sleep until a task is accomplished.

He combined academic, medical practice/training and spiritual work at all times, and despite this his family life was never negatively affected.

His work life spanned a long period of 45 years of exceptional heartfelt services in Nigeria, United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia and he had over 100 publications in high impact journals, both onshore and offshore. He also served as Examiner for West African College of Physicians and as External Examiner for many Nigerian Universities and in some West African Countries for many years.

He had contributions to journals and books such as, *Cooperation for African Development* (S.K Olamijulo 2003), *Promoting Human Values Through Cooperation*; (Afonja Simi, Oyedeji Gabriel); *Igbobi College: A Methodist and Anglican Churches Cooperation in Secondary Education* (Oyedeji Gabriel). In December 2017, his trilogy titled *Sense and Nonsense about Health and Healing, The Ordinary Christian and Considerations: Sacred & Secular* was launched with pomp and pageantry; hence one can conclude that his own library was not completely burnt down because those writings were products of his thoughts and experiences. In fact, he was almost at the verge of completing a compendium chronicling all his seminars, lectures, talks, conferences,

sermons/messages, workshops and students lecture notes, before the bell tolled.

Professor Ademola Oyedeji was one of the unsung numerous heroes in Nigeria as his mentees wondered why he was not made an Emeritus Professor despite his landmark contributions and being a reference point in Paediatrics and medical practice in Nigeria. Baba was featured in the maiden edition of *who is who in Nigeria*, published by News Watch (Nigeria) in year 2000.

Family life

Baba was a consummate family man. He got married to his wife of 54 years, Madam Oluyemi Olufiropo Alaba, in December 22, 1968 at the Chapel of the Resurrection, University of Ibadan. The wedlock was blessed with four biological children and many others too numerous to count. His family is too large to number.

Discrimination was never in baba's policy, as there was neither Greek nor Jew. He treated all of us either biological or otherwise, same way with the same measure. My parents referred to him as my father on many occasions. When I needed permission or approval to undertake any important thing or take decision, they would ask me if I had informed Prof and what was his answer. I vividly remember that when I was to get married, it was him that had to approve the date. In fact, I could say I enjoyed some level of preference over others including his biological children. We were just so close. Our closeness made some to think I'm one of his biological children. Some gave me appellation of Special Adviser or Baba's Right-Hand Man. This closeness was maintained till he breathed his last on 21st December, 2022.

He was a disciplinarian of the highest order and he would not spare anyone when it is necessary for correction or discipline. Many are times we had all gotten bits of his acerbic tongue.

Baba was a spiritual and career counselor, father figure with a Midas touch and a rallying point for all. He was so good at

everything he does that I wonder if he was begotten like the rest of us. Baba believed in making new friends without breaking ties with his age long friends some of whom they had met since primary, secondary and university days.

Ministry/Clergy life

Baba was ordained into the Anglican Ministry in 1983 by the Rt. Rev. G.I.O Olajide, the then Bishop of Ilesa Diocese as a non-stipendiary Priest. He became full Priest in 1984, rose through the ranks and was collated as a venerable in August 1997. He transferred his ministerial duties to Osun Diocese in 2007 and retired from active Clergy service in September, 2013. Despite his retirement, the diocese never left him as he was usually called upon to give seminars, preach at Diocesan retreat and workshops.

Ven Ademola Oyedeji took his ministerial duties with passion as he was actively engaged in church planting in many villages in Ilesa Diocese villages such as Ilerin, Ajubu Ikoromoja etc., where after travelling several kilometers to get there he had to wait for the congregation to come out for Service. Despite this he was undaunted. He was resolute that the gospel of Christ must be spread.

Many modern-day pastors, I doubt, have never encountered, seen, nor understood this kind of service; instead they are heard saying 'God is sending me to Canada, United Kingdom or United States where life is a little easier and where technology has chased away the gods and demons'.

Baba's dedication to his ministerial duties made his fellow clergymen nicknamed him (Saint Gabriel). Baba never believed in cringing before Bishops to be preferred or in eye service. I could recollect in one of our many engagements, he queried whether it is right to give anyone 'Reverend' as a title. To him, in actual fact, only God should be revered.

His messages/sermons are classical, spirit filled, soul searching, sound and thought provoking. He shaped many destinies through his ministry and life style which gave many entries into the ministry, some of

whom are now Bishops, Provosts/Deans of Cathedrals and Archdeacons.

Venerable Oyedeji served God passionately in various capacities, he spearheaded and championed many activities, he made significant landmark contributions that led to the birth of Diocesan Health Boards in many Dioceses of Church Nigeria Anglican Communion. Every service Baba rendered to the Lord had been credited on his scorecard while here on earth and will continue to speak in his favour in the greater side of eternity.

Above all, in spite of all his achievements, two things are important and clear. First is his absolute faith in God, and secondly, he values his relationships with people more than he values any of the items on his credentials.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Baba used to describe himself as a proud farmer, he loved and enjoyed farming. He used to brag about being the best farmer on Obafemi Awolowo University Campus where some people might have been ashamed to be identified as a farmer in the University Community. The other important extra-curricular activity he so much cherished is discussion on topical issues, exchange of ideas and spending time with people.

Asking him how he was able to combine so many responsibilities all at the same time, he responded: "it has been God's Grace, Grace of God and God's Grace", he concluded.

As the remains of the revered Venerable Professor Ademola Oyedeji was committed to mother earth on 12th May, 2023, that same Grace will surely take you home because you had fought a good fight. You had finished the race and you had kept the faith.

'Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for his eyes have seen Your salvation'.

Key Words: Venerable Professor Gabriel Ademola Oyedeji; Paediatrician; Cicely-Williams Prize; Ido-Osun