

# **A LETTER TO MY CHILDREN**

**The Autobiography of Olufemi Majekodunmi**

**A Letter to My Children**

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# **Table of Contents**

Dedication

Desiderata

Foreword

1. An Irregular Childhood
2. Off to England to Study
3. The Start of My Career and Family
4. Going Global
5. On Leadership
6. Life's Peaks and Sunsets
7. Drawing the Curtains

Afterword

## DEDICATION

To the memory of my loving wife, Victoria.

## DESIDERATA

By Max Ehrmann, 1927

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others,

Even the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery.

But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals;

And everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection.

Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment; it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune, but do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.

Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be; and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

## FOREWORD

My dear children,

Your departure from the nest evoked mixed feelings.

On one hand, I'm proud and happy to see you finding your paths in the world and embarking on your journeys. But on the other hand, there's a sense of sadness as the once lively rooms of our house now feel quiet and empty. Our home has become a house where footfalls echo.

As I walk through the halls, I'm reminded of you by the photos hanging on the walls, frozen moments in time that bring smiles to my face. The artworks around the house tell stories, each room holding memories of its past inhabitants. It is suddenly apparent, with a tinge of nostalgia, that our home has become too large for just me. With much quiet comes reflection, and I deem it a good time to put pen to paper and share with you my life story.

I am writing to you because I feel that I didn't know my parents as intimately as I would have desired. They didn't talk to me much. And I, now in the position of a parent, see your curiosity about my life. You are asking questions which need answers.

In an effort to satisfy your curiosity, I'm documenting the events of my life. Through this, I hope to give you insight into who I am, how I've lived, and the dreams and legacies I hold dear.

## 1.

### AN IRREGULAR CHILDHOOD

I was born on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940, at noon, in Clapton, East London, England, at the Salvation Army Mother's Hospital. This was during World War II, which began in 1939 and ended in 1945. More than forty million people lost their lives in that devastating conflict.

Established in 1913, the Mother's Hospital was part of the Salvation Army's effort to care for vulnerable women, particularly unmarried and poor expectant mothers in East London. At the time, there were very few places in London where such women could receive proper maternity care. Most had no choice but to go to workhouse infirmaries. The Mothers' Hospital helped to change this by offering a more supportive and dignified place for care to pregnant women during some of the most difficult periods of the twentieth century - World War I, World War II, and the years of economic depression.



My place of birth - The Salvation Army Mothers' Hospital, East London

Despite the war, a May Day parade was taking place in the streets just outside the hospital where I was born. My mother could hear the celebration from her room. Perhaps the joyous mood outside was a contrast to the cloud that surrounded my birth, for I was born out of wedlock.

My father, Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi, was a twenty-four year old medical student at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. My mother, Olutomi Agbebi, was a twenty-two year old student of fashion design in England. They never told me the story of how two people schooling in different countries met and conceived a child - me.

Due to these circumstances, my birth was not received with the fanfare that marks the coming of a child, albeit the first. My maternal grandmother was outraged by the sudden news that her daughter, who ought to be studying, had a baby in England. My mother hailed from the strict Christian family of the Agbebis in Ibadan, and they were incensed that they had sent her to get an education, and what did she do? She had a child instead.

In 1944, my mother brought me home to Nigeria to meet my paternal grandfather. We travelled in one of the wartime shipping convoys, which was still plying Liverpool and Lagos. This was possible because that region was far from the main theatres of war.

My paternal grandfather lived in our hometown in Ikereku, Abeokuta. His name was Ijaola, but when he became a Christian, he was baptised James Bernard Majekodunmi. He had a brief stint of education at Wesleyan Boys High School in Lagos, which was cut short due to financial hardship following his father's death.



My dear mother, Mrs. Olutomi Inniss nee Agbebi,  
in her younger days.

Nevertheless, the education he received proved valuable. It enabled him to communicate effectively with European traders and missionaries, and he became a successful merchant. Evidence of his prosperity included his many shops across Abeokuta and his imposing four-storey home, Lion Building, named in honour of his father. For many years, it was the tallest building in Abeokuta.

When my mother brought me to him, he took a great liking to me and named me Olufemi, meaning 'God loves me'. In the traditional Yoruba family, it is the paternal grandfather who names the child; my father never gave me a name. My other name, Adetokunbo, followed naturally, because I was born in a foreign country, which was not the norm in those days, and it means 'royalty from across the seas'. I was also named Adefolarin by my mother. It was my maternal grandfather's name.

The typical Yoruba child acquires many names at birth. Our surname, Majekodunmi, also has a backstory to it. My great-grandfather was first named 'Majekodunmi' when one of his children was accidentally killed by a horse, which one of his servants was exercising. Naturally, he sorrowed over his child's death. However, observers interceded for the servant, asking that his life be spared, pleading with the comforting words: "Don't let the incident hurt you."

This deeply moved him, so he replied, "I won't let it hurt me." From that moment on, he was called Majekodunmi, which translates to 'I will not let it hurt me'. Before that incident, his name was Oyeneeye.

He arrived in Abeokuta with the first settlers in the 1830s. Abeokuta is eighty kilometres north of Lagos. He became the Balogun of Ikereku (the Commander of the Army in Ikereku), one of the towns in Ile Egba (meaning the land of the Egba). As the Balogun, and due to his valiant feats as a soldier, his symbol was the lion. They named him the 'Kiniun of Egba' translated, 'The Lion of Egba'.

In 1860, he fought in the Ijaiye war, a conflict between Ijaiye and Ibadan. He also participated in battles against Dahomey's invasion in 1851, 1864, and 1874 alongside the

Egba forces. The British recognised Ile Egba as an independent state and established trade relations. Nevertheless, in 1914, Ile Egba became part of the amalgamated British colony, today known as Nigeria.

So, that is a bit of my ancestral history.

Well, after meeting my grandfather, my mother left me in Nigeria and went to Sierra Leone, where she'd had her early education. She got married to someone else and later had a daughter, Gladys Ebunoluwa. Eventually, in 1943, my father arrived in Nigeria with a white lady. Her name was Nora Creina McLaughlin, and she was Irish. They had met in 1938, at a party hosted by a mutual friend in Trinity College. She was a graduate of English Literature from Oxford University. He married her in January of 1943.

My first recollection of my father was of me being five years old and living with him in Calabar, where he served as Chief Medical Officer with the Nigerian Medical Services. He was a successful medical doctor who worked mainly in the field of obstetrics and gynecology. On his return to Nigeria, he joined the civil service and, at various times, served in Calabar, Osogbo, and Lagos, and he took his family along with him.



My great-grandfather, Balogun of Ikereku, Chief 'Oyeneye' Majekodunmi's compound.



My grandfather, Chief James Ijaola Bernard Majekodunmi, the  
Otun of Egba.



Lion Building, which is well over 100 years old. It was built out of Iroko and Granite

Nora, my stepmother, took a liking to me and showed me much kindness despite the challenges she faced. It wasn't easy for her to marry a man who already had a child. In addition to this, she was disowned by her parents for marrying a black man. However, she wholeheartedly embraced her new life in Africa, getting involved in Nigeria's social and cultural activities.

Between them, they had three children. The first, Koye, a boy, was born in Calabar on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945. The second, a girl, Sade, was born in Osogbo on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1947; and the third, a boy, Desmond, was born on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1950, in Lagos. I remember when Koye was born, and they said to me, "Look at your baby brother." Peering into his cot, I noticed his umbilical cord and thought that made him look imperfect. So I said, "Oh, he looks very

nice, but what is this nonsense?" I grabbed the umbilical cord and was going to yank it off. They quickly stopped me. Later, I grew very fond of Koye. We were good friends.

### **My Early Years**

When my father was posted to work in Osogbo, he sent me to start school in Lagos, because in those days, education was rudimentary. It was Obafemi Awolowo who stimulated educational development in Western Nigeria. Obafemi Awolowo was one of the most influential reformers and visionary Nigerian statesmen of the 20th century.



Mommy, Nora Creina McLaughlin and my father, Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi

As the Premier of the Western Region of Nigeria in the 1950s, his introduction of free primary education and healthcare for children left an indelible imprint on the nation's educational sector. However, these developments occurred after my basic education, which I began at age seven. I started school at Girls' Modern Academy in Lagos Island.

Lady Ayo Manuwa owned the school, situated at 46, Igbosere Road. Irrespective of the school's name, boys attended it as well. To my consternation, lessons were taught in Yoruba. The other pupils laughed at me because I only spoke English, which was my first language. I couldn't speak Yoruba because of my stepmother's influence. This made learning difficult and stressful for me, especially during dictation sessions.

Whenever that went on, I spied on other pupils' work because I had no idea of what the teachers were saying, and I didn't know what to write. From nursery school, I went on to Christ's Church Cathedral School on Broad Street for my primary education. There, to my relief, we were instructed in the English language.

During my entire early education, I lived with Mr. and Mrs. Sowunmi, who resided in a bungalow on Campbell Street, where St. Nicholas Hospital stands. Mrs. Sowunmi was one of my three paternal aunts with whom I lived at different times in my early years, and then, I also stayed with my maternal grandmother in Ibadan.

While I lived primarily with the Sowunmis, I briefly resided with my father's sister as well, and later with my aunt, Mrs. Lambo. I moved around a bit as well on my mother's side of the family. I boarded with my maternal grandmother's younger sister, Mrs. Hoare, after whom the Hoare Memorial Methodist Cathedral in Ebute Metta, Yaba, was named, and then, with my uncle, Bishop Oyebode. My formative years were spent with each of them, and they were God-sent to me.

One of my absolute favourite people in the world was my father's younger brother, Uncle Omololu Majekodunmi. He was the only brother my father had through his mother, Alice Oladunni Soetan, who was my grandfather's youngest wife. She had six children, two of whom were boys: my father and Uncle Omololu.

He was especially kind to me during my school days. At the time, he worked at the Lagos Town Council, and I would often visit him there. He would give me a shilling or two to buy treats and other little things. He also bought pencils, erasers, and other school supplies for me.

Uncle Omololu was very handsome, and his wife was Aunty Jumoke. He was one of the people who had the greatest influence on my life. Above all, he was a good and generous man.



My father's younger brother, Uncle Omololu Majekodunmi, with his wife, Aunty Jumoke.

Although I was cared for, I often felt my father could have done better by me. Despite feeling neglected by him, I lived with him for a while. My relationship with my mother was practically non-existent, and I wished she had shared more about herself with me. I distinctly recall an incident that happened when I was about eight or nine years old.

During lunch at my aunt's house, there was a knock at the door, and I hurried to answer it. Upon opening the door, I saw this lady standing there.

"Yes, can I help you?" I enquired. And she said, "Oh, I am looking for Mrs. Sowunmi." I went back to my aunt, who was Mrs. Sowunmi, the lady of the house, and said to her, "There's a lady in the parlour. She's here to see you."

"What's her name?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I responded.

So, my guardian left the dining area for the living room, and soon I was summoned to meet them. "Femi," my aunt said, "...meet your mother."

I was taken aback, staggered really, by the sudden, late introduction to someone I was told I shared deep familial ties with. To meet my mother for the first time as an aware



My maternal grand family.

child, not with a warm embrace or even a flicker of joy in her eyes, but with a cool handshake, felt like interacting with a distant stranger.

I had imagined a different scene: arms outstretched, eyes misty with recognition or longing, some sign that my presence stirred something in her. But there was nothing. Just a polite, distant nod – an introduction stripped of emotion.

I shook her hand, more out of courtesy than connection, and quietly returned to my meal, trying to make sense of the dull ache that had crept into my chest. She wasn't warm or expressive; her demeanor was reserved, almost cold. But what pierced deeper than her silence that day was the days that followed, when she never once tried to bridge the gap between us.

After she returned to Sierra Leone, I tried to hold on to the thin thread between us. I wrote her letters, pouring parts of myself onto each page, hoping to spark a connection. She replied once. Maybe twice. And then, nothing. The silence that followed was the confirmation of her lack of interest in furthering a mother-child relationship with me.

My father was much more accepting of me because of my stepmother. She loved and treated me like her own, and I called her mother. When he was transferred to the Massey Street Hospital in Lagos, I returned to live with them. I must have been about eleven or twelve years old.

One memory of him particularly stands out for me. There was just a wall between my parents' bedroom and mine. There was one telephone in the house in the 1940s, and it would ring at odd hours of the night. Of course, as a medical doctor, it would be a call to attend to a sick patient. He would promptly get out of bed, dress up, and drive to the hospital to deal with the medical emergency.

On his return, he would have a bath, get dressed, have breakfast in the dining room, and go off to work as if nothing had happened at night. He had an admirable work ethic. When I think of it, I consider that he could easily have made excuses to be late to work because he had already attended to a medical emergency at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.

That picture of him going to work at odd hours and continuing faithfully through the day was impressed on my mind. He was diligent, and I learned a lot from him. His whole life was an example of commitment. He was a consummate professional, a renowned medical doctor, with stellar achievements to show for it.

As his career progressed, he served the nation in various capacities: he was a Minister of State for the Army, the Federal Minister of Health, an Administrator of the now defunct Western Region of Nigeria, a Senate Leader, and, much later in life, a respected Elder Statesman.



No. 2 Force Road, the house in which we lived during the 1960s.



President John F. Kennedy of the United States of America meets with Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria on July 26, 1961. (L – R): Chief T.O.S Benson, Minister of Information, Broadcasting and Culture; President Kennedy; Prime Minister Balewa (holding a bust of President Abraham Lincoln); and Dr. Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi, Minister of Health. West Wing Colonnade, White House, Washington, D.C.

In serving the nation, he made friends and interacted with prominent figures. He was quite close to Sir Tafawa Balewa. He was his personal physician, and the Prime Minister often paid us visits in the house and played the game of Scrabble with us, the children.

The idea of health centres across Nigeria today was started on my father's initiative. When Tafawa Balewa was Prime Minister, my father, being the Minister of Health,

introduced a Health Services bill into parliament. Its purpose was to start free medical care nationwide, funded by a proposed health insurance scheme.

Contrary to his hope that it would excite members of the medical profession, as well as the masses, doctors in private practice kicked against it. Certainly, they intended to preserve their selfish interests. They feared that the success of the bill would abolish private practice in the country. Therefore, that bill never saw the light of day.

Irrespective of such hiccups, he was quite ambitious. Between himself and my stepmother, Nora, they executed some laudable nation-building initiatives and left a legacy in education and healthcare. My father founded St. Nicholas Hospital in 1968, and Nora, the Corona Schools Trust in 1955. She served as its first Chairperson of the Board. So, my heritage is one of achievement, enterprise, and cultural representation.

Nora and my father were quite a formidable force. She was an amazing lady. People often came to me to say, “Ah, that your stepmother must have been a wicked woman.” But she wasn’t, and if you asked me to choose between her and my father, I would choose her.

He was a tough man and, despite his glowing accomplishments, unfortunately, while he achieved publicly, in his private life, there was friction in his relationship with his wife and children.

Sad to say, in 1963, he divorced Nora and later married a Nigerian lady, Katsina Saratu Atta, with whom he had four more children: Dapo, Kofo, Folake, and Dupe. Lady Katsina Saratu Atta also became very dear to me and played a pivotal role of an encourager in my life.

I noted that my father seemed to nurse a pervasive embarrassment around how I was conceived. Perhaps a mention of me being born out of wedlock would mar his public profile, so when he wrote his autobiography, I was conveniently left out of it. He began the narrative about his children from the fruit of his first marriage. My name is mentioned in passing in a roll call of the author’s children beneath a group picture featured in the book.

Irrespective of these anomalies in our relationship, I admired and respected him. We used to have one-on-ones, just the two of us, and he once looked at me and said, “Nobody can see you and say you are not my child. It is so obvious, even to me,” alluding to our striking semblance.



Ambassador Kennedy and his wife, Janie, with Nigerian Minister for Health, Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi, and his wife, Nora, at the St Patrick’s Day celebrations, Irish Embassy, Lagos, 1962. Source: National Archives of Ireland.

### **My Choice of Career**

When I was about thirteen years old, my stepmother, Nora, asked me, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And I said, “An engineer.”

“Why?” she asked. “Don’t you want to be a doctor like your father?”

“I don’t like blood,” I confessed. But, she probed further, “So why do you want to be an engineer?”

“Oh, I want to build big buildings,” I answered. However, she objected to my choice of engineering. “No, no, no! What you want to be is an architect.”

“Arche...what?” I had never heard the word. So, we looked it up in the dictionary and found the meaning of the word, *architect*, and I said, “Oh, mommy, I see.”

Each Christmas, I was given a Meccano set, which consisted of coloured metal pieces, screws, and nuts. An instruction book was included in the box, allowing you to build whatever you wanted. Soon, I became so proficient at it that I never needed the book. I just said, “Oh, this is rubbish. I can use my imagination.” Christmas was always exciting for me, as I received increasingly complex Meccano sets each year. This was an early indication of my inclination for building structures.

When I clocked thirteen, my father decided that I was to go to school at his alma mater, St. Gregory’s College at Igbosere Road, in Obalende, Lagos. Originally established by the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1882, it was a school for boys and had very high standards. Through his influence, I was granted admission into St. Gregory’s College for my secondary education. So, off I went to boarding school.

### **Life at St. Gregory’s**

The students at St. Gregory’s College excelled in sports, particularly cricket, football, and athletics. We were the premier school for soccer in Nigeria and often participated in interschool matches. We would journey to Christ the King College in Onitsha to compete against their team.

I began to manage the team, handling its administration and organisation. Though not particularly skilled at football, playing in the second eleven helped foster a growing sense

of responsibility. My knack for coordination and leadership didn't go unnoticed, and that's how they made me the team manager.

Football gear, unlike cricket's, required a completely different set of jerseys and equipment, prompting a refresh to suit the game's unique demands. So, I got different jerseys for the football team than what we had for cricket. Secondary school revealed quite the mischievous streak. A group of friends - every one of them a rascal - was the perfect recipe for all sorts of escapades, most of which led straight into trouble.



With so much energy spent on mischief, academics naturally took a hit. The first year ended poorly, and repeating the first form became inevitable. It was disheartening to watch former classmates move ahead, leaving me behind. Yet, I met another band of spirited mischief makers and kept company with them. Even at that, I wasn't the oldest in the class.

Michael Enahoro, whose older brother was Anthony Enahoro, became my good friend. The Enahoros were quite a driven and politically active family. Anthony Enahoro was Obafemi Awolowo's ally in the fight for Nigeria's independence. Well, Michael was the ringleader who spurred us to mischief. Our group members included Brown, who was an Igbo boy, Kwame Arthur, a Ghanaian, and many other brilliant youngsters. They are mostly dead now.

There are only about three of us left. We were always fighting and sneaking out at night when the reverend fathers had gone to bed. Michael Enahoro and I used to go to the Ikoyi cemetery at night to pluck mangoes. With graves for seats, we'd settle down to eat the sweet fruits. Whenever we were caught, we got a good flogging.

Michael was a self-taught guitarist, and he taught me to play the guitar. We often sneaked out of the boarding house in search of adventure and to visit nightclubs around our school. There were all sorts of strange people and prostitutes in the nightclubs. We'd leave school at about midnight and return at 4 a.m. Yes, we were wild! We were only teenagers, but extremely daring.

There was a nightclub in Obalende that showcased various bands from Lagos and Ghana. So, we went there to enjoy the music and generally have fun. It was there that Michael introduced me to Fela Anikulapo Kuti, marking the beginning of our acquaintance. Though he was two or three years older than me, we connected and became cordial. Owing to my dexterity with the guitar, I would often guest-play at the nightclub. Fela's band also came to perform.

My escapades were not limited to Lagos. My maternal grandmother lived in Ibadan, and I desired to explore nightlife in the city. So, to fulfill my intentions, I would inform my father that I wanted to visit her in Ibadan for the holidays. My main interest was exploring the city's nightlife.

When she was asleep at night, I would sneak out to the nightclubs and play with Roy Chicago, another band owner in Ibadan. My mischief miffed my grandmother. "Your

status is so low!" she often said to me. That was her favorite expression. Maybe she would approve of me now.

Well, back at St. Gregory's, my friends and I continued to violate the rules of the school. One time, I was caught reading at night, studying for upcoming exams. Everyone had the prep time for reading, and I had missed the scheduled reading hours. I needed to catch up, so I read at night, at the wrong time, and was caught.

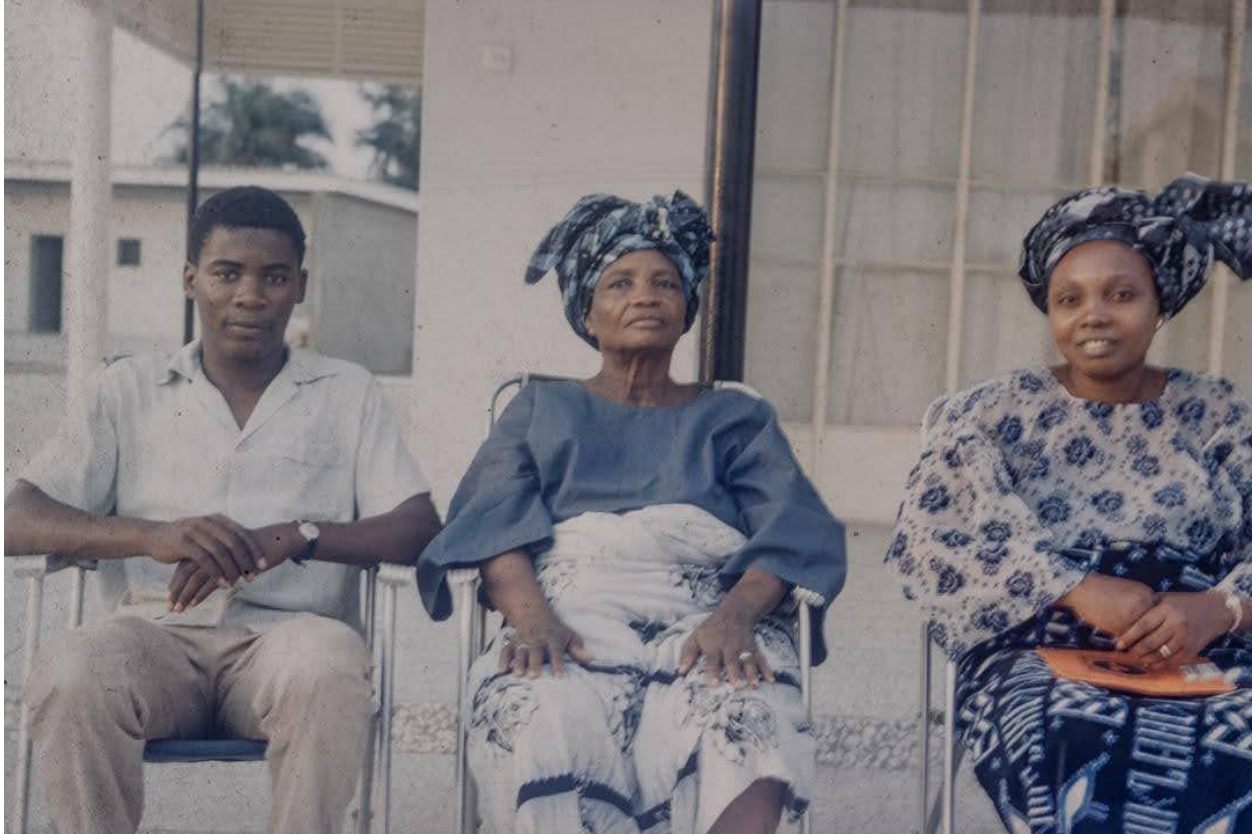
Consequently, the Irish reverend fathers rusticated me. When my father got my report, he lost trust in me. He was incensed and said to me, "You are a useless boy. You are not going to sleep in this house."

So, I was sleeping in the room of one of the stewards in the boys' quarters. After a while, he forgave me, and I returned to the house. Then, the school recalled me to resume my studies. Eventually, I had this hunch: *"Hey, if you don't take your life seriously, you will never amount to much."*

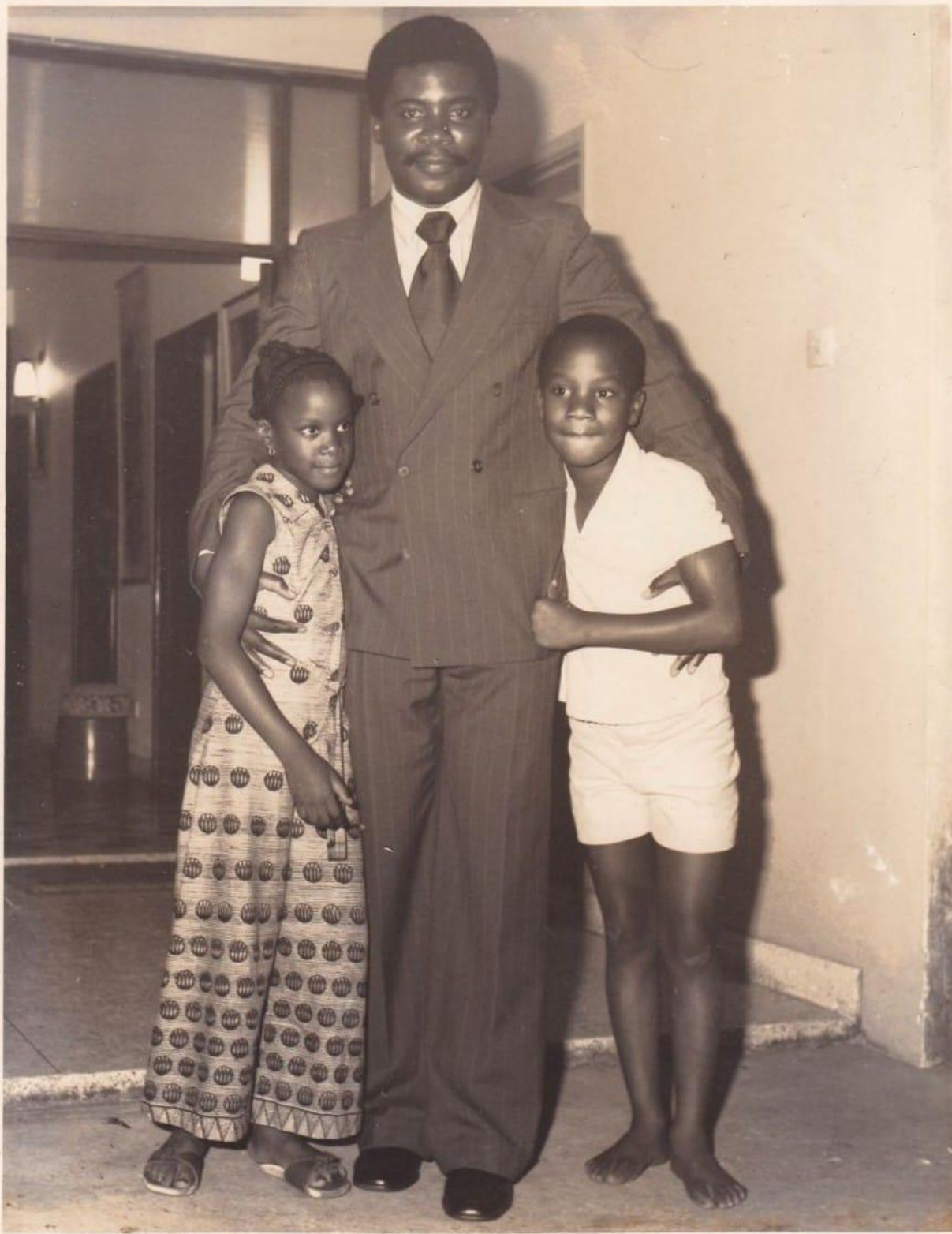
The tide turned in the sixth form, my last year at St. Gregory's College. I began to work very hard. We sat for about eight subjects in the Sciences, and I had the second-best result that year. It was a good time. I had fun being a rascal and still managed to finish second best in the class. I was that ambitious.

Between all the people that brought me up – my parents, aunties, and uncle in particular – they did so with strict moral principles which I did not adhere to in totality. In retrospect, I think they did a good job, and I owe Mommy (Nora) and my aunties a debt of gratitude for all they did for me.

With their investments in me, there was no reason for me not to pursue the straight and narrow path. I was still a rascal, though for some of my years, but they laid a solid moral foundation that influenced my life.



From left to right: Myself, my paternal grandmother, and one of my aunts, Mrs. Adeline Awujoola Odugbose, my father's sister, whose daughter is a medical doctor.



Myself, with two of my siblings, Kofo and Folake.

**STILL I RISE**  
**By Maya Angelou**

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

Copyright: Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*.

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## 2.

### OFF TO ENGLAND TO STUDY

My father wanted me to study at the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, where one of the professional courses on offer was Architecture. My uncle, Justice Lambo, had said to him, "You have the money. Send your son to England to study Architecture in a proper school." The term '*Proper school*' reflected the popularly held opinion in those days that everything white was superior.

My father responded to him, "But, you know, the boy is very rascally." However, he submitted to his suggestion and decided to send me off to his friend, Ambassador Gbeniyi Martins, at the Nigerian High Commission in England. By then, my father was the Minister of Health.

He summoned me and said, "Ambassador Martins will assist you in looking for a School of Architecture. However, I don't want you to go to school in London. I know you. You are a rascal." He emphasised my bent for mischief.

On February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1960, I hopped on a BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) flight to England. When I arrived there, I had to find accommodation, so I got a bedsitter. Then, off I went to meet the ambassador at the Nigerian High Commission.

Ambassador Martins had a friend who was a successful, well-known architect in England. His name was Ronald Ward. Ronald Ward was quite a prosperous and ambitious man. In the course of his career, he did a lot of work in Nigeria with brands like the Bank of British West Africa now known as the First Bank of Nigeria. He designed some of their buildings. Aside from being an architect, he ran for the position of Lord Mayor of London, and lost, unfortunately.

So, Ambassador Martins told him about this nineteen year old youth from Nigeria who was in England to study Architecture, with hopes that he would offer me some career mentorship and assistance, which he eventually did. The next step was to find a school.



Justice Lambo and his wife, my aunt, Chief Mrs. Adekanla Lambo, one of my father's younger sisters. He encouraged my father to send me to the United Kingdom to study architecture. My aunt was 103 years old when she died.

My father's admonition was ringing in my ears, "*You have to find a school outside London! Otherwise...*"

To ensure that I was obedient, I found two schools – one was in Birmingham, the University of Birmingham, which is way out of London. The other was Kingston College of Arts, which was in Surrey, only half an hour's train ride from London. I played on my father's lack of knowledge of the United Kingdom because he'd studied in Ireland.

When I communicated with him I said, "Sir, I have found two schools. One is in Birmingham and the other in Surrey, but I hear that the one in Surrey is really good."

"Okay," he replied.

With his consent, I went ahead for an interview with the Head of the Department of Architecture at Kingston College of Arts. Before I travelled to England, the results of the Cambridge School Certificate examinations I sat for in Nigeria, had not been released. The Cambridge exams were affiliated with the London University and all our papers were brought to England for marking. I remember that when I went for the interview, the results were billed to be out by December 1959.

The Head of the Department of Architecture asked me, "How did you fare in the Cambridge exams?" I said, "I don't know. The results aren't out yet."

In those days, things were not as complicated as they are now. He picked up the phone, dialed the number of the Cambridge examinations' office, and enquired about my results. He talked for a bit, then put the phone down and said to me, "We've checked. You passed. You can come in."

Thus, I was privy to my results before my peers in Nigeria could access theirs, and gained admission to study Architecture at Kingston College of Arts. The academic year in England started in September, so Ronald Ward let me work in his firm, Ronald Ward and Partners, while waiting to commence my studies. Eventually, seven months after I

arrived in England, at the beginning of September 1960, I started my education at Kingston.

### **My Experience at Kingston College of Arts**

Kingston College of Arts was a great citadel of learning. It was run after the principles of the French Beaux Arts (meaning Beautiful Art), an academic art style heavily influenced by French neo-colonialism. It was an important style of Architecture in Europe and America.

The school environment was simple and relaxing, by the picturesque Hogsmill River. It did not have sprawling grounds or anything, so we weren't provided with accommodation within the facility. Sometimes, we'd sit on the terrace and at other times, have lunch by the river.



Kingston College of Arts.

Source: Architects Journal, January 21, 2020

The college had a racially diverse student body. I was the only African there during my studies. An African architect had been there before me; his name was Kofi Macgregor. He was a Ghanaian who lived in Nigeria but is dead now. At the time, we had about ten Nigerian architects worldwide, whereas today we have numbers in the thousands.

A group of us used to share flats. We were a mix of Caucasian, Asian, and, of course, myself, African. One of us, an Asian from Singapore, I think, had a wealthy father who sent him money, and he bought a house for £2000. There was another Asian, Mr. Chow, who used to cook for us. He went on to become famous, successful, and wealthy, owning one of the prominent restaurant chains in London and New York.

Sadly, I lost touch with them after my education.

The foreign culture at Kingston College expanded my view of life. For the first time, I encountered homosexuals and people with other inclinations. There was a gay lecturer on campus, and I saw that they had an intermingling of the same sexes.

### **Discovering My Entrepreneurial Side**

While at Kingston, my father gave me a monthly allowance of £25. This was insufficient for my upkeep in England. Out of this, I paid my fees, and it was meant to cover my feeding, everything. Meanwhile, students from the Western Region of Nigeria, schooling in England, were getting a scholarship allowance of £39. I brooded on this deficit. What was I to do for income? I remember telling my father, "Papa, this money is insufficient for my upkeep. For instance, the students on scholarship from the Western Region are getting £39."

He said somewhat sarcastically, "Right, you go get a scholarship from the Western Region." Following his advice, I applied for the scholarship. When the scholarship board came to England from Ibadan to interview the students, which they did annually, I went there.

They called me before the panel, and I strode in, confident of leaving with a better financial status than I had come with. When I sat before the panel, they asked, "Yes, can we help you?"

"Yes. I want a scholarship," I said.

"What's your name?" they asked.

"Majekodunmi," I answered.

"Oh. Are you related to Majekodunmi, the Minister of Health?" they enquired.

"Yes, yes. He's my father."

"Oh. So, doesn't he send you any money?" they asked, doubtful of the sincerity of my intention.

Feeling a bit uncomfortable, I said, "Oh yes, he does." By this time, they were wondering what I was up to. "So, why do you need a scholarship?" they prodded.

"The money he sends me is not enough," I replied truthfully.

They looked at me with suspicion. "So, you want to get your father's money as well as the scholarship?" they asked in disgust.

When they put it like that, it didn't paint a pretty picture. An awkward situation for the Minister of Health's son to be seeking a scholarship in addition to his allowance from his father.

"Ehn, yes," I stuttered. They thought I was being greedy.

"Get out of here!" they ordered me out of their sight.

Perhaps that was a good thing, because it turned out that I had to be innovative. My entrepreneurial instincts were triggered, and I left there, racking my brain for survival ideas. From then on, I embarked on small business ventures.

At the time, I had a girlfriend named June Ritchie. And thankfully, she had a van. Using it for logistics, I would buy doors and second-hand mattresses, place them on bricks, and sell them to my classmates. My profit was quite good, such that I was able to supplement my income from my father and go on self-sponsored trips to other countries in Europe.

Our summer holidays lasted three months, and in that time, I would work on building sites as a bricklayer or carpenter. Thus, I was able to buy myself a scooter. As it is often said, greatness is born of adversity, and indeed, the hardship spurred me to entrepreneurship, and for that, I am grateful to my father.

Kingston College of Arts wholistically trained creatives: architects, fashion designers, interior and furniture designers, which was very good. This was a bonus because it did not restrict itself. I slowly began to evolve into a decent human being.

### **Social Life**

As would be expected in a youthful environment, at Kingston, we often organised our entertainment. We used to have end-of-year parties and cabarets. I remember teaching some ladies how to dance. By that time, I had become innovative. Bands often came to play at our school dance. Somebody was responsible for booking the bands, and at one such event, had booked the Rolling Stones.

The Rolling Stones was an English rock band that started in 1962. So, at that time, nobody knew who they were. Even the famed Beatles had not emerged on the global music scene.

When the Rolling Stones played, it was awful, and the students complained. "Please don't book that band again. They are rubbish." And as it turned out, they became one of the most popular bands and best-selling music artists of all time. The sixties marked the beginning of the pop music era, a period that saw the emergence of many influential and iconic bands.

Interestingly, I reconnected with my old friend, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who was also in England for studies. Fela was a brilliant mind. He wasn't just some gutter snipe. Considering his background, his mother, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, was the first woman to drive a car in Nigeria, maybe even West Africa. She was an educator and political activist. His father was a reverend and school principal, so he had good family pedigree.

Fela, however, charted his own course and excelled at it. He was inclined towards music. He studied classical music at Trinity College, London. He had an aversion to the kind of music they were playing, and being that person with strong views, he focused on developing his African genre of music, called Afrobeat. He used to play at events where Nigerian students were gathered in London. Having gained a following, his band was often invited to play for African students.

There's an event center called Porchester Hall in Bayswater, London, where Nigerians would invite him to perform and pay him a fee afterward. It was at one of such events that he spotted me in the crowd and screamed with joy, "*Ah! Majek!*" Then, he came over, and after exchanging pleasantries, he said to me, "Please, can you come up on stage and play alongside me? All these guys here are West Indians. They don't know how to play proper music. They are all playing Calypso."

I agreed to help out and went upstage. I played for a while and got off stage.

Then, he came up to me again and said, "Majek, can you come and join my band?"

That was an impossible ask. I literally could see my father's face and hear his voice as he reprimanded me for my misconduct. The fear of my father was wisdom. "Ah, Fela," I said, "... I was told to come here to study Architecture. My father will kill me... literally kill me if he hears that I am here in London playing music."

However, I went with him to one or two recording sessions at a place called Ealing Studios. I can swear that I played on one or two of his recordings, but I can't tell you which one, and I played for free.

## **Internship in America**

In 1963, I travelled to America for the first time for my internship year. This was because there were few architectural firms in Nigeria in those days. While there, I was exposed to racism. Racial segregation was in place, and it was not the best time to be black and living in America.

When I arrived, I was hungry, so I went to a drugstore to have a meal. In those days, drugstores also had a restaurant service, so you could buy a meal and eat it there. Having in mind the racist proclivity of the average white American, I walked into the drugstore, and there was a white girl at the counter. Other people were seated at tables, attending to their own business.

I walked up to her and said, "Excuse me, I want to eat something. Where can I sit?" She looked at me quizzically and asked, "What do you mean, where can you sit? There are lots of seats."

Emphatically, I asked, "Where do black people sit?" I wasn't ready to upset the apple cart. "Oh, you can sit anywhere you like," she assured me.

That was my mindset about America, based on all I had read and heard about them. However, I was excited to be there, in a different environment, and to meet new people. It didn't change the fact that I hated racism and all forms of racial oppression like apartheid; and because of this, I am passionate about the progress of black people in white society.

Segregation and racial oppression are negative forms of co-existence of humanity, which thrived in the sixties. I wasn't exempted from such treatment. Nonetheless, whenever, I found myself subjected to racial slurs, I was not violent. We all tried to take it in our stride. I never experienced a physical assault.

Once, I was walking down a street in Washington DC with a white girl, and some young white men in a car came and were shouting invectives at her, calling her a prostitute and all sorts of names. It happened to me in England as well. In fact, in England, a policeman accosted us and asked me, "What are you doing with this girl?"

And I said, "She's my girlfriend."

He was upset because she was white, and I was black. Oppressive environments always put you on your guard, such that you are never truly at ease. Except, you are with other black people, then you can relax, and of course, we had our own nightclubs and social gatherings at the West End of London. Over time, things improved in England, but it's still there.

Anyway, when I arrived in America, I had to find an efficiency which is a room in a house, with your little bathroom. In England, we called it a bedsitter. I found one at the Methodist International Youth hostel, and stayed there, although I didn't like it very much.

Through my father's influence as Minister of Health, I got an internship placement with an architect, William Henry Metcalf in Washington DC. His firm was on Jefferson Street, not far from the White House. Also, I was fortunate to interact with a black professor of Mathematics, Professor McCain at Howard University. We often discussed black history and books. At his death, he willed his books to me. His two grown daughters sent me a letter and a suitcase full of books.

### **Graduation from Kingston College of Arts**

At the end of my higher education in 1966, I bagged a certification from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and then worked for two years with Ronald Ward and Partners, the same one that I worked with when I arrived England nine years before.

On the day I was graduating from Kingston College of Arts, we were all lined up to be given our certificates, and I'll never forget this statement from Mr. Brown who was the Head of the Department. He said, "Now, we have given you all these pieces of paper to certify that we who trained you are satisfied that you are now capable of practicing the profession. But it does not mean that you know everything about the profession. All it means is that we are certifying that you have now reached a stage where you can go out and continue your education on your own."

I thought that was a powerful statement, and that's what we did. We went out, and through the practice of the profession, we continued to educate ourselves. That's where I am today. I didn't get any other degree. It was just that one from Kingston College of Arts.

### **An Interesting Feature in the Drum Magazine**

Between 1966 and 1967, as a young Nigerian professional living and working in London like many Africans in the city at the time, I was part of a confident, outward-looking generation navigating life in a rapidly changing cultural moment.

One day, I was approached by an agent connected to the Drum magazine, the influential African publication with a strong presence across West Africa, including Nigeria. Although Drum originated in South Africa, its West African editions regularly featured fashion and lifestyle stories produced from its London bureau, reflecting the energy and style of the Swinging Sixties.

The magazine had satellite editions in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, each with localised content. Its London bureau produced many vibrant fashion and lifestyle features for the West African editions. During this period, the renowned Ghanaian photographer James Barnor, who was based in London, frequently shot cover images that highlighted Africans in modern London settings.

For example, the August 1967 Nigeria edition featured Ugandan singer Constance Mulondo in a stylish London scene, while the February 1967 issue showcased Jamaican model Kayode (“Kayla”) Pinnock posing in London.

These images, which portrayed Black African individuals engaging with London’s fashion and cultural life, captured the distinctive Drum style of the era, blending African identity with London’s cosmopolitan glamour.

The agent invited me to take part in a photo shoot intended for the Nigeria edition of the magazine. The idea was to capture the image of a young African professional blending naturally into London’s cosmopolitan fashion culture. For the shoot, I was paired with a young British model, and the setting chosen was outside Buckingham Palace, an iconic London landmark that symbolised both tradition and global visibility.

Dressed in sharp, modern attire, I stood alongside the model against a backdrop that included the palace guards, creating a striking contrast between old institutions and new cultural expressions. The image reflected Drum magazine’s editorial style at the time: bold, stylish, and unapologetically modern. It presented Africans not as outsiders, but as active participants in global city life.

This photograph formed part of Drum Nigeria’s 1967 visual narrative, which frequently showcased Africans in London engaging with fashion, music, and contemporary culture. The experience placed me within a broader story of young Africans abroad: educated, confident, and shaping new identities at the intersection of our indigenous heritage and international modernity.

## **My Return Home**

In the course of establishing a business of buying dilapidated houses, renovating and selling them, my father instructed me to return to Nigeria since I had accomplished the reason for my being in the UK.

It is not like these modern times when children insist on their own way. I was obedient to my father, and I actually liked Nigeria and preferred to start my practice there. I had dreams and was extremely ambitious. Besides, in the nine years that I was away for my studies, I only came home once when he was the Administrator of Western Nigeria.

I returned to Nigeria via the sea on an MV Aureol, a passenger ship for Elder Dempster Lines.

# DRUM

AFRICA'S LEADING MAGAZINE  
OCTOBER 1967

UK PRICE  
TWO SHILLINGS

What is it like to be  
**BLACK**  
in  
**BRITAIN?**

NIGERIA  
EDITION

### 3.

#### THE START OF MY CAREER AND FAMILY

Back in Nigeria, to my delight, I found that my father lined up two job interviews for me. One was with Architect Augustine Egbor, who was the Director of Buildings at the Federal Ministry of Works in Tafawa Balewa Square. The other one was a husband and wife team of architects, John Godwin and Gillian Hopwood.

That morning, I went to the Ministry of Works because it was an early appointment. Of course, as is often the case in the civil service, the receptionist said in local parlance, *"Director no dey. E never come."*

After I'd waited almost an hour, I decided to leave to meet up with the other appointment, so I said, "Please tell the director I will be back. I have another appointment." Then, I went to this place on Boyle Street, called Godwin and Hopwood, a British-run architectural firm in Nigeria.

It was one of the best architectural practices in the country, involved in shaping the built environment of post-colonial Nigeria through projects that included institutional buildings, offices, and housing, while also playing a significant role in training and mentoring emerging Nigerian architects, effectively serving as an incubator for local talent.

On getting there, I met Mr. John Godwin. He said to me, "Yes, young man, what can I do for you?"

I said, "Oh, I am looking for a job as an architect."

Curiously, he enquired, "And, where did you receive your education?"

"Kingston College of Arts," I informed him.

"Kingston College of Arts, you say? When did you complete your studies?" he asked with interest.

“Two years ago.”

Then, he asked if I happened to know anyone named Eric Brown. “Yes. He was the head of my department,” I confirmed with a nod.

“Ah, really?” he said. “You mean you were trained by Eric Brown?”

“Yes, sir.” I reiterated the fact. He went on to explain his interest in knowing if I was acquainted with Eric Brown, “You see, I also went to Kingston, and while I was there, Eric Brown was a lecturer. Did you pass?”

I was a little surprised at his question. Eric Brown had been a lecturer of repute.

“Yes, I did. I have my certificate,” I replied.

“Okay, I’ll check it out,” he said. “But in any case, anyone who can survive Eric Brown for seven years must be competent. Come and start work tomorrow.”

That was great news. I thanked him and made to leave. Then, I turned around and said, “Excuse me, sir, I would let you know that I am only going to work here for two years.”

This was February 1969, and I had it all planned out. I was ambitious and entrepreneurial. He was evidently surprised at my position. I suppose many young people would have been happy to have a good establishment to work with and secure a steady income. Not me – I had big dreams.

“That’s very strange. It’s the first time I am interviewing someone, and they are giving me conditions,” he said.

“Well, sir, I have visions of what I want to do.”

I desired to run my architectural practice with my designs for Nigerians and Africans. Having worked in England, I didn’t know about working as an architect in Nigeria, as well as what architecture is about in the region. Though a qualified architect, I needed to add these competencies to my qualifications. I was modest enough to realise that just

because you are qualified in one environment, doesn't mean that you are qualified in all environments.

"Okay, come and start work," he said. Thus began my career in Nigeria.

### **An Eligible Bachelor**

I was going to be thirty-two years old, and I was not yet married. Curious observers made attempts to find out if there was something wrong with me. "Are you alright? Maybe you don't like women or something?" the audacious and vocal ones among them queried me. Those who were more reserved limited it to enquiring looks. I was no spring chicken. Most of my friends were married. In those days, you didn't get to be thirty-two, and you were not yet married.

When I was asked such questions, I often replied, "No, it's not that I don't like women. It's just that I haven't found the type of woman that I want to get married to." The features I desired in a wife were someone who would stabilise my life, look after my children, and protect them from the sort of childhood trauma I experienced.

At the time, I had a religious bent, and I wanted someone who would bring them up with strong morals. Today, my attitude towards religion has changed. I still believe in God, but I don't believe in religion. I think there's a lot of fakery.

My cousin, Badejoko Majekodunmi, was at the University of Lagos, and she lived in Moremi Hall on campus. One day, she said to me, "Ah, Brother Femi, we are having a hall dance. Why don't you come? I think I have a girl for you."

So, I went to the dance. While there, she introduced me to a girl, but she wasn't my type. She was too *'oyiboish'* for me, and I didn't want that sort of person. My preference was a down-to-earth homebody. And a little while into the dance, I spotted her.

Seated quietly in the corner of the room was a fair-complexioned girl, and she caught my interest. So, I said, "Who's that girl?"

Badejoko winced, "That one's not your type either. She's too strict. She's SU." SU is the abbreviation for people who were members of the Scripture Union, focused on Christian activities and perceived to be rigid.

"Well, maybe I'll ask her to dance."

Those were the days of chivalry which seems to be a lost art in modern times. We danced and then, she returned to her seat. Strangely, I didn't even ask for her name or anything, but she had piqued my interest. Sometimes, it is the quiet women that leave men tongue-tied.

After the dance, I could not locate her, and I desired to see her again. "What sort of nonsense is this?" I chided myself.

There was a musician then, a band leader named Segun Bucknor. He was launching his new instruments at the Glover Memorial Hall. Being a musician myself, I went there to enjoy the session. Within the same building was a gallery, and as I strode up the steps, there was the quiet, fair-complexioned lady from the dance, walking out of it. Immediately, I approached her. "Excuse me, I don't know if you remember me. We met at the dance at Moremi Hall."

"Oh yes, I remember you," she replied. To not repeat my past blunder, I quickly asked for her name. "My name is Ms. Afe," she said.

"Pleased to meet you," I replied. During that time, the culture was that you wouldn't immediately tell new acquaintances your first name and divulge everything about yourself. Mentally, I thanked God that at least I had a reference. Later, I made an effort to communicate with her, so I called Moremi Hall.

There was only one phone in Moremi Hall, so whenever you called the hostel, the porters would send for the student you wanted to speak with. Whenever I called, she seemed elusive. They couldn't get her. Finally, on one occasion, someone helped to locate her,

and we spoke. That marked the beginning of a series of platonic dates. Much later, I found out that her first name was Victoria.



Ms. Victoria Imiamiye Afe

While we were getting to know each other, I had a girlfriend in England, a Nigerian named Biola Adeniyi Jones, and I told Victoria about her. "That's very good," she said to me. She also told me about her boyfriend in England. So, I said, "Oh, good."

Theirs was a platonic relationship – going to dinner, a visit to the cinema, and she told me all about it while I listened with half interest. I was torn between my liking for her

and my loyalty to this other girl in England, who by the way, wasn't wholly committed to me either.

When I had my leave from work, I told Victoria that I was travelling to London to see my girlfriend. She bade me farewell. "Good luck to you. I hope everything works out."

When I arrived in London, I went to propose marriage to Biola, but we got into a big fight, and she threw the ring away. Then, I discovered that she had a boyfriend, and he was Victoria Afe's brother – a funny coincidence, how life works! They were both at the University of Leeds. So, I said good luck to her too and returned to Nigeria now keen on seeking out Victoria.

By the time I returned to Nigeria, UNILAG had concluded its academic session, and students were on vacation. Victoria had gone home to Benin, where her parents lived. Bent on accomplishing my mission, I tracked her down to Benin. I told her about my breakup with my girlfriend. "So, what are you going to do now?" she asked with concern.

"Well, I don't know," I responded.

One thing led to another, and our relationship evolved. In the course of our engagement, Victoria got pregnant. She was in tears. I guess due to her family's values and her affiliation with the Scripture Union. However, I reassured her, "Do you think I won't marry you? I will marry you." This brought her relief.

Then, I proposed marriage to her. Meanwhile, I told my father that I had seen the girl I wanted to marry. Thus, I brought her to him for an introduction. He took a liking to her, primarily because she did not wear a wig. She had this lush full head of hair that was lovelier than any wig on the shelf, and he did not like women who wore artificial hair. That was the fashion trend among women in the sixties and seventies, which continues to date.

Next, he got his mentee, Dr. Bello Osagie, an obstetrician and gynecologist, to enquire about her family. This was because, like Victoria, he was also of Benin extraction and would be better positioned to do a background check on her family.

After a while, he returned to my father and said, "Ah, Papa, your son couldn't have done better. Victoria is from a good family. Her father was a teacher at Edo College. Then, he became a Permanent Secretary and eventually, Secretary to the government of Ogbemudia, the military governor of Edo state. They are not rich or anything, but they are straightforward and principled."

My father was pleased with this bit of news.

### **Settling Down**

We made all the arrangements with our parents and were married in Benin City on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1972. Governor Ogbemudia supported our wedding arrangements with houses for us and our guests to stay in. Governors were influential and powerful, and with my father, being a senior government official as well, he had all the courtesies accorded him. All my friends came from around the country, and it was a grand affair.

That morning, on the stairway of my father-in-law's house, my father hugged me. I was deeply touched by his gesture. My father was not a tactile person; he didn't believe in hugging or being emotionally expressive. When he did that, it gave me a warm, unforgettable feeling.

The wedding ceremony proceeded smoothly, and we transitioned into married life.



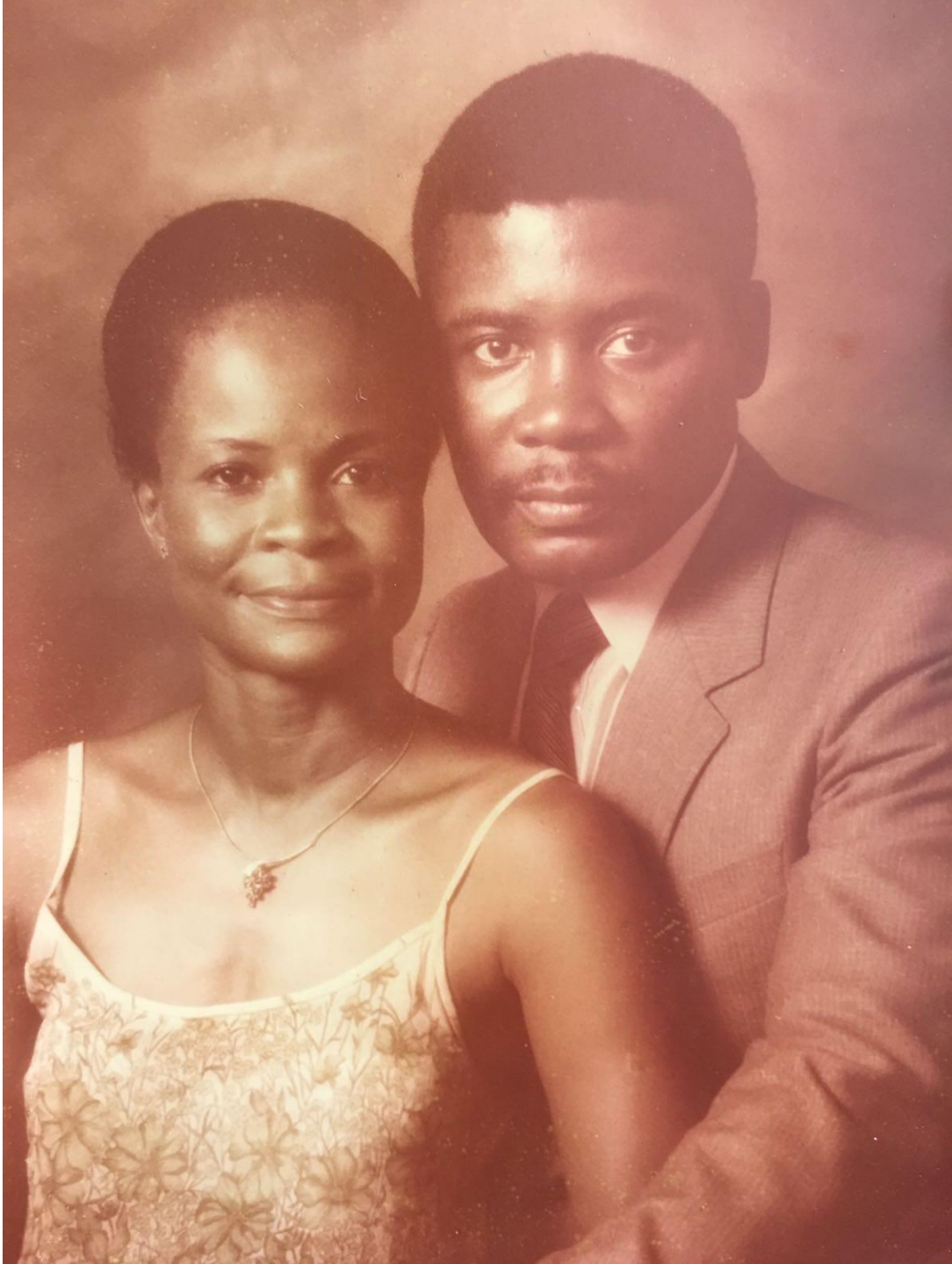
The Afe family - All of Victoria's siblings from her parents.



My wife and I in Edo traditional wedding attire at our marriage ceremony, with my mother on the left.



Wedding photograph of my bride, Victoria, and me, walking through a ceremonial passage formed by fellow architects, who raised their T-squares in an arc—an architectural homage imitating the military tradition of the crossed swords.



My dear wife, Victoria and I, shortly after the wedding.

Victoria was pregnant, and she couldn't drive, so I employed a driver to take her around. Our first home was a compact flat in the middle of Lagos, and my finances were limited. Irrespective of that, there was no way that I could shuttle between work and ferrying her around, and her comfort was my priority.

Though she was a graduate of Mass Communication from the University of Lagos and was working in the Ministry of Communications with Aminu Kano, we both agreed that for the first few years of our marriage, she should stay home to give the children her full attention.

My resolve was that my children should never suffer the trauma I experienced as a child, and so I promised to ensure that they never lacked anything. My commitment spurred me to work hard to keep my word.

Our first child was born on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1972. Her name is Olufunke Muwahan, and she was named by my father. During the first nine months of my daughter's life, she slept on my chest because we had only one bed. Naturally, a bond evolved between us. Three months later, Victoria was pregnant again. My son, Ayodeji Omoruyi, was born on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973. There were eleven months and ten days between them.

Adefolarin Omorogbe graced our home on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1977. When Adefolarin was born, my mother asked my father to name him after my maternal grandfather, whose name was Adefolarin, so he did. My fourth child was born on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982. My father named him Olufemi.

However, I was not comfortable with it, so I said to him, "Baba, I feel uneasy about children sharing the same names as their fathers because it may impose a sense of competition or pressure to live up to their father's standards. I'd rather the child have his individuality." In response to my objection, he named him Akintunde Olufemi.



My first daughter, Olufunke, born in 1972. She is now the mother of four boys, and the eldest is about to go to the university.

My annual salary at *Godwin and Hopwood* was £4500 per annum. It was a good pay grade. A cordial relationship existed between me and my employers. On my part, I served them well, and they ran an excellent practice. Nonetheless, my vision beckoned. Previously, in 1971, I had felt that I was ready to leave the practice. Therefore, I informed them of my decision to start on my own, but they didn't want me to go.

Mr. John Godwin was honest with me, "Do you want to know the truth? You are not ready yet."

I deferred to his counsel and stayed for another two years. There was a lady whose husband was a professor at the University of Lagos, and another young man who worked alongside me in the practice. The three of us discussed ideas and thought that we should set up our practice together.

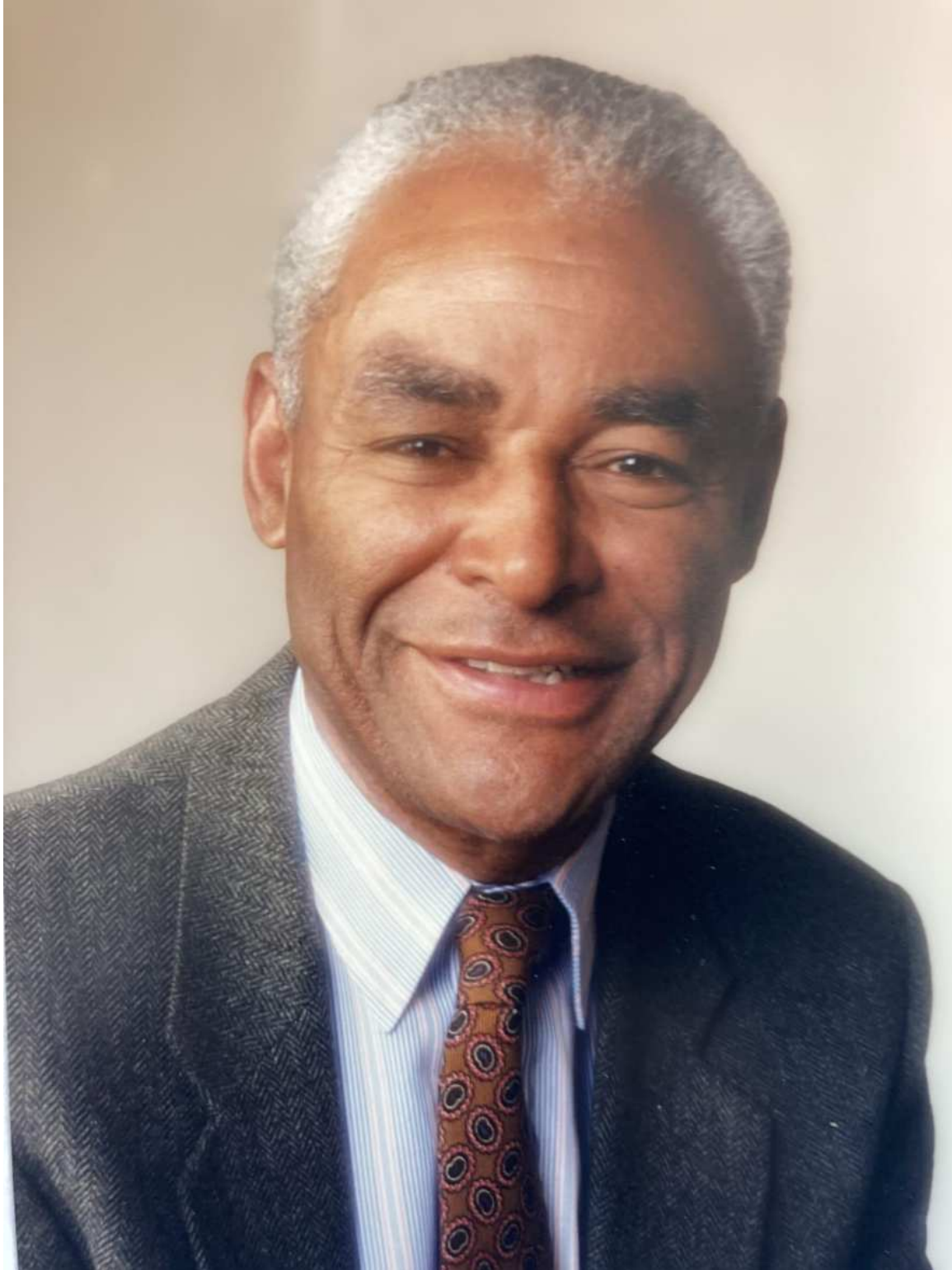
I shared our considerations with a friend, Victor Thomas, whose father was the late Professor Horatio Oritsejomi Thomas, a pioneering Nigerian plastic surgeon, who had been the Vice Chancellor at the University of Ibadan. We have shared a long-standing relationship. So, Victor said to me, "If you have enough confidence in yourself, go and start out on your own. Why do you need people to start?"

Victor was the first significant influence to encourage my entrepreneurial spirit. It felt daunting for a young man of thirty-three years with no capital. I went to my father and said to him, "Sir, I want to establish my practice."

"Eehn?" he mused in the typical Nigerian way of processing information that you are not convinced about. "Why?" he asked.

"Well, it has been my ambition to do it," I replied.

He looked at me, and I was unwavering. "You are working with *oyibo* people, earning a good salary, and you want to leave that? I am a doctor, and my highest salary in the civil service was £2,400 per annum. You are earning £4,500 working with *oyibo* people, and you want to walk away from that?"



My childhood friend, Victor Awadigin Thomas, who encouraged me to establish my practice in 1969.

I said, "Yes...And daddy, I want to borrow some money from you."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I won't lend you money, but I will guarantee a loan for you with my bank."

He proceeded to write a note for me and I went with it to his bank, the Bank of British West Africa, and was granted a loan of £5,000. He was quite supportive of my dreams. Certainly, he was earning quite well, having held the position of Minister of Health and serving in other various government portfolios. However, he simply wanted me to thoroughly contemplate my decision.

So, I went to my boss, Mr. John Godwin, and said to him, "Sir, it is time for my exit." This time, I was resolute about leaving.

"Okay," he said. "You have been a very good hand, and we are sorry to see you leave. If anything happens...and we are not praying your venture doesn't go well, but I want you to know that you'll always have a place here."

Then, they did something extraordinary and magnanimous. They told me to continue managing the projects assigned to me at the company in the name of Godwin and Hopwood. Upon receiving the fees, they retained the funds used for overhead expenses and remitted the profits to me. This experience instilled in me a lasting lesson on how to treat others, as they treated me with kindness and fairness.

### **Femi Majekodunmi Associates**

Armed with goodwill, unwavering determination, and a healthy dose of ambition, I established Femi Majekodunmi Associates (FMA Associates) in January 1973. We started at 52, Odunlami Street, by Campos Square, Lagos Island, in a two-bedroom flat I had rented from my father. The rent was £30 per month. Our home was also his property, and we paid rent there as well.

We weren't groomed with a sense of entitlement and I had learned early that I had to earn my keep. People were shocked to learn that I paid my father rent, and I always replied, "It's his property, not mine." Within six months, we repaid the loan from the bank because there was a healthy demand for architects and the business environment was free of corruption.

### **An Enabling Environment for Business**

Doing business in Nigeria was so much easier in those days. There was ample goodwill and support that created an enabling environment for entrepreneurship to thrive. In turn, we, the business people, were honest. We didn't steal money; clients called us up to give us projects, and we delivered. The government was the biggest employer of the construction industry, and there weren't many skyscrapers funded by the private sector as it is today.

The only major building in West Africa was Cocoa House in Ibadan, for which I must give kudos to the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo for his initiative. It is twenty-six storeys high, the first skyscraper in West Africa, and still looks modern. Then, there was the Independence Building in Tafawa Balewa Square.

We didn't have to bribe anybody. However, we had to do our marketing, which was based on social contacts. We established relations with Vice Chancellors, Ministers, and people across board. The concept of '*bigmanism*' had not taken root in our society. Even in the villages, there was honesty.

I recall an incident that occurred when I lived in Osogbo with my father. We were all going away on a holiday - my father, my step-mom, and us children. We all piled in the car, and then, someone said, "We haven't locked the front door." So, my father alighted from the car to lock the door, and he couldn't find the key. It was then that we discovered the door had never been locked. This reflected a time when doors were often left unsecured, even at night.

Actually, in those days, sometimes you'd come home to find someone in your living room sitting there waiting for you. Either they were scheduled to visit, and you had not returned home, or they were just passing by and stopped over. People would let themselves into your house and leave without stealing from you. It was normal.

Through the years, our value system changed. People became greedy. Today, you can't trust anyone. You send someone on an errand, and you'd have to ask them for a receipt. We keep tabs on one another because of dishonesty.

### **Building a Best-in-Class Team**

The project to design the Schools of Art and Science was one of the projects we inherited from Godwin and Hopwood. Then, there were few indigenous architects to enlist in our workforce, so my wife and I would fly to London to interview English architects and bring them to Nigeria. Work was ample and the corporate landscape was devoid of bottlenecks when we started in business. Clients paid our fees and we were able to rent houses and buy cars for our English staff.

The paucity of Nigerian architectural professionals in Nigeria was such that two things happened:

We all used to go to the few universities that offered architecture as a course, to interview the final year students before they left, so that we could grab them. Even at that, these were young, untrained professionals, so I used to go to England with my wife, armed with a Polaroid camera, to recruit British architects. Eventually, I employed four of them at the same time because I had work, and there was nobody experienced enough to do it.

Again, my wife was supportive because I didn't want to employ cowboys who would come to Nigeria and be playboys. So, I leaned on her judgment during the interviews. Women have amazing instincts and intuition by which they see through people.

Furthermore, we had thought through what we wanted in our staff and stipulated our hiring criteria. They had to be married and bring their wives along for the interview. Victoria would talk to the women, while I interviewed their husbands.

This step in the process was most important because of an incident that happened when I was at Godwin and Hopwood. We had brought in expatriates on the team. Usually, I was the one who would receive them at the airport when they arrived in Nigeria.

There was this man who had been recruited and came to Nigeria with his wife. I took them to their flat on Okotie Eboh Street in Ikoyi, anticipating that they would settle in, and he would commence work the following week. This was on a Friday.

On Monday, I walked into the office and didn't see the fellow. Then, John Godwin said to me, "Ah, he's gone back to England." I enquired as to the reason. He answered, "Oh, his wife saw a lizard and she went ballistic."

She had seen a lizard with a big, red head and was frightened.

Bearing that incident in mind while building my team, we had to be careful about who we were hiring, because it was quite expensive to bring them over. You had to rent them an apartment in Ikoyi because that was where all the white people lived. Then, you had to buy them cars and pay for their flight to Nigeria, and so on. After each interview session, me and Victoria would sit down and analyse them, look at the pictures, and draw our conclusions. That was how we recruited a competent workforce.

The Nigerian corporate workforce was diverse and multiracial. Some of the people working in the ministries were not all Nigerian. There were people of other nationalities. I remember an Indian man who gave me a lot of work. I complained to him that I didn't have people to execute all the projects, and he advised that I travel to India, Sri Lanka, and other countries to hire staff. In response, I asked, "Where will I get the money from to do that?" To my surprise, he gave me an advance payment.



Myself with some of my early staff, recruited from the UK, with their wives and Victoria.

When Nigerian universities started opening faculties of architecture, we went to their departments to interview final year students. If they were good, I promised them a job on graduation. This way, we recruited indigenous architects and trained them. Thus, we were able to transfer skills and build a competent local team of architects.

When we celebrated fifty years of the practice, so many of them attended the event. Many prominent architects today cut their teeth at FMA Associates. We weren't the first Indigenous practice, though. There were others like Olumuyiwa, Macgregor, and Ekwueme who were all my seniors. They were students of Architecture in England and members of RIBA.

And to advance the profession locally, they got together and started the Nigerian Institute of Architects, (NIA), which was inaugurated in 1960 by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa.

## **Other Business Ventures**

The Conqueror paper is a high-quality paper well used and rated in the corporate environment. I liked its colour, texture and weight.

One day, I requested for it at W.H. Smith, a retail store in London, and they were in short supply. So, they suggested that I go to Wiggins Tip, a company that supplied the paper, which I did. To my delight, I discovered that it was sold at a significantly lower price than in the store, and I recognised an opportunity to purchase it in bulk and export it to Nigeria. This I began to do, and I brought in a few container loads of it. The venture was profitable for a time until competition struck.

There was this Indian company that was its distributor in Nigeria, and they learned about me. Expectedly, they saw me as a threat. To force me out of the market, they undercut their price. I couldn't match their scale and, consequently, was put out of business. By that time, I had made a healthy profit, so I didn't lose as much.

Another thing I tried was a venture in manufacturing. I had acquired a parcel of land on the beach along the Atlantic Ocean, opposite Tincan Island. It was five or six acres of land that I bought for £25,000 from a French woman, Charmaine Lefevre. She was married to an Englishman who was an engineer in Nigeria. We got along well and used to spend time with them.

One day, she said to me, "Femi, we are leaving Nigeria. We are getting old. Would you want to buy this place?" It had two Nissen huts, which were originally built for the army as temporary accommodation, as well as a caretaker named Simon. It was an attractive offer, so I bought the property and took Simon on as my staff to cater for it. This was circa 1984. Simon is dead now, but his son still lives there.

The property became a getaway for my family, and it offered serenity and relaxation, away from the hustle and bustle of the city of Lagos. To get to the property, we'd go by boat. I had a Filipino friend, an architect with the Ministry of Works, and we would go there for the weekend with my wife, children, and other friends. In retrospect, the country

was so safe that we stayed in those fragile, tin huts without fear of harm – you can't do that now.

One day, one of the Filipino guys had a brainwave. He said, "That's the ocean. Do you know that we can make salt?" So, I thought it was a good idea and tried my hands on that as well. Unfortunately, it wasn't successful.

#### 4.

### GOING GLOBAL

My vision for FMA Associates was to be a Nigerian-based organisation. But, as things turned out, I ended up having offices in Botswana and South Africa, and all by accident. As Nigeria evolved politically, its racial composition became less diverse. Many foreigners left its shores, and more indigenous professionals emerged across industries.

In 1987, I was in Canada when my office called to say that one of the Italian companies in Nigeria approached us to take on a project at risk, which was to enter into a competition in Botswana for the offices of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

Robert Mugabe was the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, and the President was Canaan Sodindo Banana. It was a risky project to embark on because there was no guarantee of fees. If the Italian company won the competition, then we would get the job. We bet on the risk, did the project, and presented it to Robert Mugabe. That was my first time meeting him in person.

We were the only black architectural firm in the competition and stood out in second place. When we went to Harare to make our presentation, the civil service was totally comprised of black people, and they were surprised to see an all-black African architectural firm. "Where are the white people?" they wondered. They found this inspiring.

Due to the prevalence of apartheid in the region, professions like architecture were dominated by whites. There were less than ten black architects in Zimbabwe, so the Zimbabweans approached us to teach the blacks to grow in the profession.

In response to their appeal, I took two of my architects from Nigeria to Zimbabwe, and one of them was a woman. Again, they were awed by the fact that we had a female architect. It was unusual to them because, apart from black suppression, there was also

the fact that it was a male-dominated profession. We tried to register our office there. People didn't realise that Zimbabwe was more polarised than South Africa.

After two years of attempting to register, we failed due to resistance from the whites, so we left. Robert Mugabe brought his people up by their bootstraps. Perhaps that was why he was so successful in his leadership. He was a fantastic man to his people. Of course, no white man would praise him.

On learning of our failed attempt to establish an office in Zimbabwe, a certain fellow, then the Director General of Shelter Afrique, advised us to try another country in the region. "There's a country called Botswana," he said. "And I know the Director of Works in the Ministry of Works. I'll introduce you to her."

"Botswana? Never!" I objected vehemently. My response came from a feeling that Botswana was Bophuthatswana, which was a homeland within the enclaves carved out in South Africa just for black people. I am a proud African and did not want to settle for less than the best in locating my offices.

"No sir, Botswana is a country on its own. It has nothing to do with South Africa. I'll give you a letter to Mrs. Mapola Johnson at the Ministry of Works." Thankful for this alternative, I took my male colleague along with me to the Ministry of Works.

Upon arrival, we met the lady, who, to my surprise, turned out to be a black woman, and we presented the letter to her. Happy to hear that we were from her old friend, she accorded us a warm reception. I told her about how we had tried unsuccessfully to set up a practice in South Africa. "Oh, so what do you want to do now?" she enquired.

"Well, we are aware that you don't have enough black architects, and since we are around the corner, we thought it a good idea to establish a practice here," I further explained. After listening to us, she gave us a note to Mrs. Radibe, who worked with a company in the same building, they were company secretaries. We went to her to register FMA Associates in Botswana.

What I could not achieve in two years in Zimbabwe, I achieved in two weeks in Botswana with just about \$50. Thus, we began to get work from the Ministry of Works in Botswana. Our Botswana office is well established, and we own our building.

When apartheid ended in 1994, we moved into South Africa and rented a small office in Pretoria. My team was quite aspirational. I had been waiting for that because I believed that one day, the black man would be free.

The process of becoming a member of the Botswana Institute of Architects was quite rudimentary. However, the South African Institute of Architects was a different kettle of fish. It was being run by white people and before you could set up a practice in South Africa, you had to apply for membership, which I did. I was bold enough to apply because apartheid had recently ended.

They responded to my application, saying that I was required to take an exam. I said, "Fine by me."

A date was scheduled, and I went to their secretariat in Pretoria. Though this was 1994, post-apartheid, the panel was entirely constituted of three white men. They welcomed me, "Thank you for coming. Do you mind having lunch with us?"

They had set up a table for lunch for four. So we had lunch, a very pleasant one. When it was over, they said, "Thank you very much for coming."

Quite confused because I had come for an examination, I responded, "Oh, but I thought there would be an examination."

"Oh yes, that was it."

It turned out that they had their council and were advised that having viewed my profile, I was more senior to all of them, and therefore, would not require a written exam. I was already the President of the International Union of Architects (UIA), and the lunch was to determine if I was genuine, and not some charlatan. So, that was it. We shook hands and they sent me my certificate.

Certain values guided our operations at FMA Associates. We had a no-bribe policy. This was a result of growing corruption in Nigeria – a key factor that spurred me to establish offices outside the nation. Corruption in Nigeria is not something that just happened yesterday. Yes, today, the scale is incredible, but it has been there a long while.

To survive, my contemporaries were going into shoe-making, selling rice, and other items. The Nigerian government was the biggest client in the country in the seventies, and the civil service was unethical. Organisations faced bottlenecks of delayed fee payments and demands for bribes. From permanent secretaries to low-level civil servants, everyone wanted their commission.

I had to pay my staff, and so we were forced to cede to their demands for our fees to be released. This contravened our ‘no bribe’ policy, so I am guilty as charged. However, I never took any money that did not belong to me, and my children were trained with the orientation that even if you have to starve, never take what’s not yours.

To continue to depend on work within a corrupt system was unacceptable to me, and thankfully, an opportunity opened up for me to move my operations beyond the Nigerian shores, and I could work out of Botswana and South Africa, as well as Nigeria. I met some very good people in Nigeria, though.

For instance, we had done the Federal School of Arts and Science, through the office of the Ministry of Works in Lagos. So, a minister, an Igbo man, saw it and said to his team, “Oh, this is good. Don’t we have another three to build?”

“Yes sir. Osogbo, Mubi, and Ogoja are yet to be done,” they answered.

“Okay. Go and tell the same architect to do them,” he replied. That was how we were contracted to do the other three without a request for a bribe or an inclination for tribalism.

## **Advocating for the Interests of Black Architects**

I had always been interested in the economic emancipation of black people, particularly architects. To date, I get excited about black people doing well, such as Serena Williams winning the Tennis Championships, or Philip Emeagwali and his strides with the internet.

I am not racist in terms of black or white. However, I detest anti-black oppression. A scenario comes to mind from my time working with Ronald Ward in England. During that period, a conflict had broken out between Israel and Egypt, one of the major conflagrations in the Middle East. I was undertaking a vacation job in London as an undergraduate, and among my colleagues was a close friend of mine, an Israeli Jew.

For a while, I noticed that he disappeared and suddenly reappeared. On enquiry, I discovered that he went home to fight because he was a reservist in the Israeli army; and when conflicts like that arose, people like him returned to Israel to defend their land.

That was when I realised that there were other forms of interracial tension. I was the only black man in the office and, although I maintained cordial relations with everyone, I remained extremely proud of my African heritage. Another colleague, David Jones Evans, had a name characteristic of Welsh origins - David being a Jewish name, while Jones and Evans are distinctly Welsh. We often engaged in lively and stimulating discussions.

One day, during a conversation, he suggested a form of protective alliance, "Femi, you know, we foreigners should look out for each other." Taken aback for a minute, I said, "What do you mean? You are not a foreigner." He was white, and so I had assumed that I was the foreigner and he was at home.

"Oh, no," he disagreed with my assumption. "I'm Welsh. As far as the English are concerned, I'm a foreigner."

Then, there were interracial issues between the Welsh and English, and we would read articles in the newspapers that reported parents disowning a child or throwing them out of the house because they had chosen to date or marry someone of another race. The Scots and Irish called the English Sassenachs, a derogatory form of address.

Having experienced these scenarios within Europe, I became more resolute about the economic emancipation of blacks, especially within white environments. As an architect interacting across races, I was concerned about how well African architects were advancing both economically and in our professional representation of the continent.

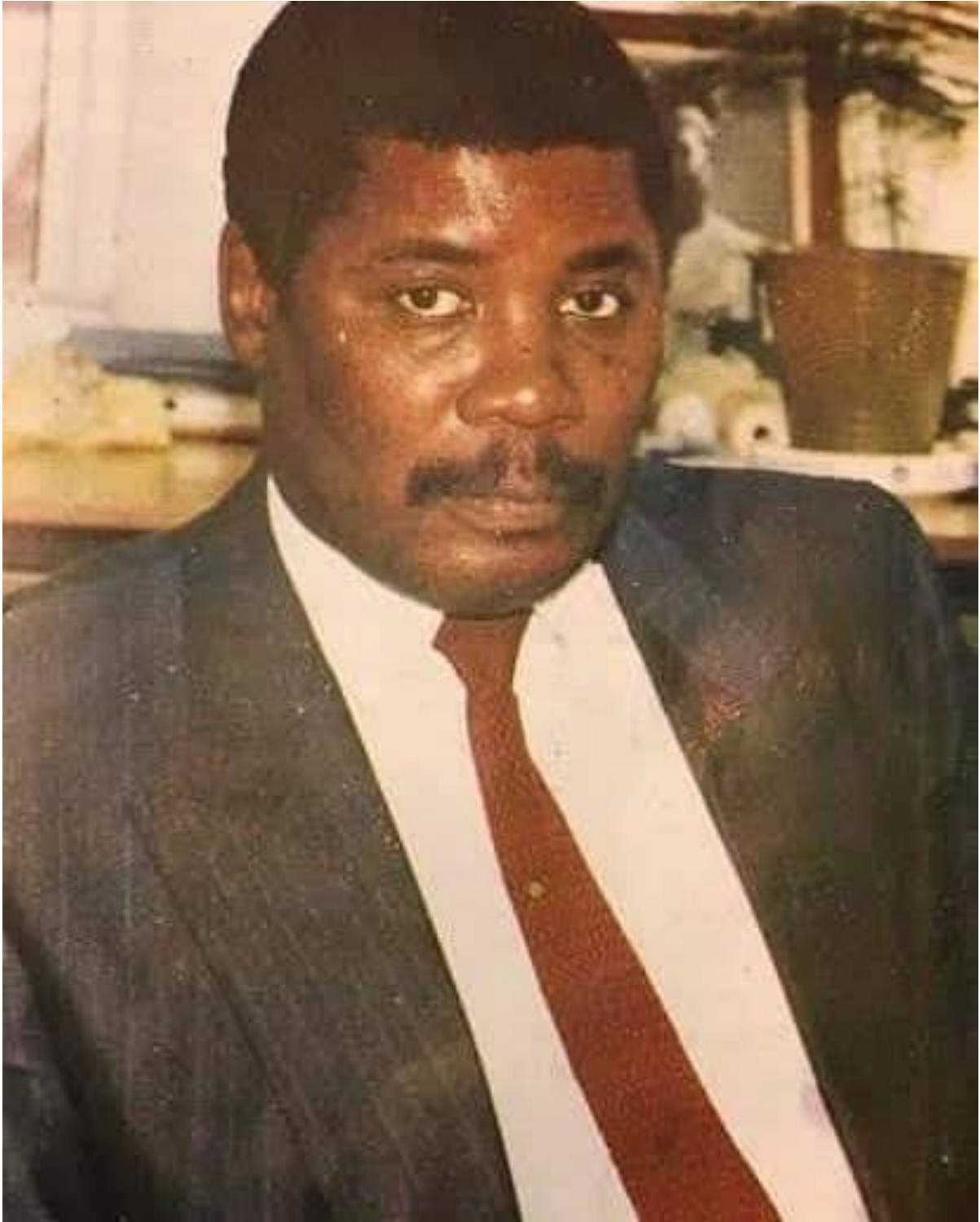
Occasionally, circumstances throw you into situations that you hadn't planned for yourself, but things just happen. I got involved with the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA) and attended the meetings. My interest was the welfare of black architects and how we could improve ourselves.

There was a gathering of representatives from various Commonwealth countries at a meeting in Canada, which I attended. I was not entirely pleased with the manner in which my fellow Africans from other nations were representing the continent.

At this meeting, one of the Vice Presidents for Africa at the UIA, who was from Kenya, Reuben Mutiso, submitted a biannual report because he was required to tender a report every six months. He gave a rather lukewarm presentation in a subservient and mediocre manner, saying that we did not do much due to certain excuses.

It was appalling to me, even though I was an ordinary member. So, I stood up and said, "Look, this is rubbish! We didn't do much because you did not motivate us to do anything. You are supposed to be the Vice President."

The other Africans present could see my perspective, but they were laid back about taking responsibility within the organisation. They conferred with one another and concluded, "This young Nigerian seems to be suitable for the role."



After a couple of proceedings, at that same meeting, I was elected Vice-President, and Reuben Mutiso stepped down. Whenever we went to meetings and other Africans were there, no decision was taken without consulting Nigeria.

### **Leading Global Architectural Associations**

My involvement with architectural organisations worldwide intensified. A lot of people came to me; I didn't seek some of these positions. For instance, in Nigeria, I was not a candidate for the presidency of the Nigerian Institute of Architects when elections were held at the University of Ibadan conference center.

I was out of the country for a meeting when I got a phone call. The person at the other end congratulated me and informed me that I had just been elected as president of the NIA.

"But I didn't stand for elections," I protested.

"Well, everybody said it's you, so you have to do it," said the speaker at the other end of the line. I never canvassed for the position. Thus, I became the tenth president of the NIA.

Previously, I had said to my associates at the Commonwealth Association of Architects, "Listen, I cannot sit on the council if South Africa is a member. I come from a country where any relations with South Africa is anathema."

This was apartheid South Africa, pre-1994. Unfortunately, the association allowed South Africa a seat on the council. Subsequently, I called all the other member countries and said to them, "We can't go on like this. We either pull out of the Commonwealth Association of Architects, or we form our own."

At the next council meeting, they tabled my suggestion. However, we had started moves to form the Africa Union of Architects (AUA), to unite architects and advance the profession on the continent.



A cross section of some of the founding fathers of the Nigerian Institute of Architects.



On a courtesy visit to Alex Ekwueme, then Vice-President of Nigeria, as President of the NIA, leading a delegation of past presidents.

By the time of the next meeting, the African representatives had rallied around Nigeria, and I was at the forefront of that effort. However, my intentions were neither positional nor political; my sole concern was the advancement of African architects. Consequently, in 1981, I declined the position of president and chose instead to serve as the first secretary of the AUA, an organisation comprising members from twenty-three African countries. Henry Ssentogo of Uganda was elected President, and David Mutiso of Kenya was elected Vice President.

The AUA was inaugurated by the former President of Nigeria, His Excellency, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, on May 23, 1981. When we pulled out of the CAA, South Africa was not allowed to join AUA until its post-apartheid era, when everything was resolved.

Again, my international colleagues at the UIA approached me to become the President of the union, because they thought I was well-educated, eloquent, and full of ideas. In response to my international colleagues' request, I contested the position of president of UIA. I had a good run and won.

The results were announced in Ottawa, Canada. In the euphoria of winning and being celebrated, I got up and hugged my counterpart from Eastern Europe, who had contended for the position and lost. Thus, in 1990, I became the first black president of the UIA. This meant overseeing the interests of all the architects within the union globally. We had meetings every six months, a congress, and a general assembly.

There are five membership regions: Western Europe, The Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (which are one region); and Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East (which are the fifth).

It was a great honour. However, it was not as onerous as it sounds because each country had its own institute of architects and was running its business. It was more or less a ceremonial position. If there was an event in Brazil, Japan, or some country, I would be invited to play a role or make a speech, and there was a lot of honour attached to it.

During my tenure as President of the UIA, RIBA became involved in a dispute with other bodies regarding the number of years required to study architecture. They sought guidance from the international body, and as part of the intervention process, I wrote to John Major, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, concerning this matter, which was not unusual in such circumstances.

What was striking was that the person who responded to my letter on behalf of John Major was a Yoruba man who worked in the office of the Prime Minister. During my tenure as President, I made sure I was accessible.

I think I am one of the few Nigerians who ever gave a speech in the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, China, which can seat five thousand people. The Great Hall was filled

to capacity, and many young people were present for the event. The speech was given all dressed in my traditional regalia, *agbada*.

Interestingly, that was by default, because the person who was supposed to give the speech on behalf of Africa was Architect Oluwole Olumuyiwa. Delegates from Africa had gone ahead of him to await his arrival in China. He was much older than me.

Suddenly, we received news of his demise. He had died while in transit. This threw us into a state of turmoil, and the Africans said, "That's it. Femi, you are going to make the speech."

Finding myself in an unexpected position, I scribbled some notes on the back of an envelope, for pointers, and then stood before the crowd and spoke.

My speech started with me reflecting on the common characteristic Africans and Chinese shared, which is pride in our heritage. Then, I referred to the fact that I was dressed to showcase my African culture rather than a suit and a tie before proceeding to the body of the speech. It was well received with a resounding ovation.

On another occasion in 1993, I went with my wife to a convention in America – *The World Congress of Architects*. The event was a joint meeting of the American Institute of Architects and the International Union of Architects. The theme of the convention was "*Architecture at the Crossroads*," and it focused heavily on sustainable design and global cooperation. We were lodged in this huge suite in the Chicago Hilton, and it was so big that there was a grand piano in the living room. The Americans gave us a chauffeur-driven limousine to take us around during our stay at the convention.

In the course of events, I walked to the convention with a group of architects, among whom was Christopher G. Kennedy, son of Robert F. Kennedy. Christopher later became President of Merchandise Mart Properties, involving himself in urban and cultural initiatives in the city.

The traffic wardens halted the flow of vehicles to allow us to pass. We were in an area known as the Merchandise Mart, which belonged to the Kennedy family, and the visit was later featured in the Tribune newspaper.

Our international trips were marked by numerous elaborate receptions and dignified modes of transportation across countries, often accompanied by police outriders and convoys. I recall meeting the Mayor of Curitiba in Brazil. Curitiba is an exceptionally clean city, and I remarked on its impressive neatness and beauty within the Mayor's hearing.

He thanked me for the compliment, after which I asked, "How did you manage to achieve this?" His response, striking in its simplicity, was: "Oh, it is very easy. I buy trash."

When he came in as Mayor, the place was terrible. To curb the menace of filth, he used to tell people that if they brought a rat, he would pay them for it. He incentivised trash collection. Suddenly, he said to me, "What do you think?"

"About what?" I replied.

"I want to be President," he stated. "Do you think I would make it?"

"How would I know?" was my candid response. It was an odd question from him, considering that I barely knew him or his political antecedents. Such rendezvous with diverse individuals were the fascinating aspects and perks of the office.

One of the conditions for being President of the International Union of Architects is that your home institute would give you material resources and support. But, having studied in England and being a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, they insisted that they would support me, and gave me a young man from their secretariat to be my Executive Assistant who travelled with me all over the world. They paid his fare and hotel bills.

So, though the NIA couldn't afford to support me, I had this incredible support from RIBA. They used to send me a return ticket every time there was a council meeting in

London. However, I told them not to bother about my accommodation because I had a flat in London.

When I finished my tenure in 1993, the British came and said to me, “Do you want to stand for election as the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects?” I politely declined.

“How can I? I have been the President of all the architects in the world, and I am already on the Council of the Royal Institute of British Architects.”

Years ago, my son, Adefolarin, said to me, “Daddy, you are the President of all the architects in the world?” I said, “Yes.”

“Does it mean you are the best architect in the world?” he probed inquisitively. “No,” I answered and went on to explain how it happened. “It is a purely political and administrative position. It doesn’t have anything to do with your expertise. It just means that you have risen. At a certain stage of accomplishment, certain roles and offices do not have much to do with your professionalism. Rather, they are more about the politics of the profession.”

These were expensive ventures, but I was working hard. I was a success in terms of my practice, and also as the President of the NIA. To a large extent, I subsidised the running costs of the institute in its early days. The NIA secretariat was in my office, and I paid the salary of the Executive Secretary. It meant that much to me.

However, today the institute has its own building, having grown from 13 professionals registered as architects in Nigeria to about 12,000 members.

When I became President of the International Union of Architects, it brought immense joy to my father, who had long been concerned about my youthful unruliness and tried to push me to amount to something. Upon my arrival at the airport in Nigeria, there was a crowd waiting to welcome me.

My father was so proud of me that he had arranged a welcome party. TOS Benson, a prominent lawyer and politician, was there, as well as all my father's other friends. He came around to thinking that I did make something of my life. The acorn didn't fall too far from the tree after all.

‘The exciting thing about . . . Chicago is seeing Chicago.’



Tribune photo by Walter Kale

Olufemi Majekodunmi, president of the International Union of Architects (in white), leads architects from around the world from the Chicago Theater to the Merchandise Mart to start the 1993 World Congress of Architects Thursday.

## A global village of architects in Chicago

By Blair Kamin  
Architecture critic

How do you find an architect in New York? In these times of recession and “see-through” office buildings with no tenants, the joke goes, you raise your hand and hail a cab.

How do you find an architect in Chicago? Starting Friday, look for slack-jawed tourists furiously clicking snapshots of the city’s skyline.

They’ll be the estimated 5,000 architects from more than 85 countries, Argentina to Zimbabwe, who will be in town for a global village called the World Congress of Architects.

Billed as the largest gathering of architects in history, the four-day convention at McCormick Place marks the

100th anniversary of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, when a similar international conclave of architects met here.

But the theme of this year’s World Congress isn’t the glistening “White City” designed by Daniel Burnham and company for the 1893 fair.

Instead, the focus is on “green architecture,” which calls for buildings that consume less energy than conventional structures and offer a healthier environment for workers.

From individual works of architecture to entire communities, this school of thinking goes, designers have a key role to play in heading off the environmental equivalent of Armageddon.

“Our environment can be improved

by design—sustainable design,” Susan Maxman, the first woman president of the American Institute of Architects, or AIA, said Thursday during a preliminary convention ceremony at the Chicago Theater.

Afterward, more than 500 architects marched from the ornate entertainment palace to the Merchandise Mart, led by a police escort, two blaring bands and a squad bearing flags of the nations on parade.

The straggling, 20-minute procession temporarily tied up traffic along its route, State Street and Wacker Drive. Frazzled drivers honked their horns. Tailpipes from idling cars spewed pollutants into the air. The green architect-

See Architects, pg. 2



Myself, Olufemi Majekodunmi, in the white *agbada*, President of the International Union of Architects; Susan Maxman, the first woman President of the American Institute of Architects; Jamie Lerner, world-renowned Brazilian architect and urban planner; Christopher Kennedy (walking to the right of Susan Maxman), executive for Merchandise Mart in Chicago, which hosted large portions of the convention's activities; and James Lawler, a prominent American architect.



From left to right: My father-in-law, Mr. Okungbowa Ibukun Afe, former Secretary to the government of Governor Ogbemudia, myself and my father.

## 5.

### ON LEADERSHIP

Life and living are shaped by relationships and human interactions, and I endeavour to treat people well. Nevertheless, as expected, not everyone consistently shares my perspective, and I acknowledge that I am not without flaws.

However, I believe I possess the knack to swiftly discern, within mere minutes of interaction, if a person was relatable to me and vice versa. Occasionally, on encountering individuals, we intuitively sense - "No, this is not my type of person."

I have the privilege of having a driver who has served faithfully for fifty years, Alhaji Rashidi. Currently, Isa, my security detail, has been with me for twelve years. Someone else in my office has been working there for forty-plus years. Perhaps I was able to inspire loyalty in them, or they are simply inherently loyal people, because, on the other side of the divide, I have had staff who have stolen things.

There are treacherous individuals and of course, I have experienced betrayals. People lie against you and accuse you of things you didn't do, but that's the world. If you never experience betrayal, then you have been exempted from a norm often experienced in human relationships.

My career success is often referenced within my professional circles but there are no extraordinary principles I employed in running my business beyond basic honesty and caring about the people I lead. One time, I got to the office in the morning, and one of my staff members requested to see me. He said, "Please, sir, I'd like to meet with you. It's something very important."

"What is it?" I enquired.

He was agitated. "I got home last night, and my wife had packed out of the house and taken the children along with her. The one that pained me, sir, is that she took everything, down to the cooking pot."

Immediately, I set aside what I was doing and gave him my full attention. He wasn't an architect. He was a draftsman, but he needed to be heard, and I understood the gravity of the situation. We talked for some time, and I counselled him as best as I could.

The lesson here is that I was willing to listen; I did not just dismiss him. And I did have a boss like that who was kind and attentive. John Godwin was my model of what a leader should be. That's the sort of person I try to be, always aiming to accord respect to people of all ages and status. Some of my friends thought that I overdid it. My thought on that is, what does it matter?

To lead successfully, be realistic in your expectations of people and of yourself. There are certain things I should have done, which I didn't, and I was quite disappointed about not accomplishing them. There's no earth-shaking secret to my success. I am extremely ambitious and have always wanted to succeed. With the assistance of my dear wife, I did succeed.

As the President of the International Union of Architects, some people castigated me for writing a letter to the President of Chile. I did this because a world-famous architect from another country was contracted for a project there, and I felt upset that no local architect from Chile was involved in the project. I made my stand known. And the famous architect wrote back to me, saying, "Who is this African that thinks he can tell us how to run our country?"

This happens often in my country, Nigeria, as well - preferring professionals of foreign extraction to competent local hands, but it doesn't subtract from the fact that it is not a proper way to operate and grow the nation's economy. Ensuring justice and equity as much as it is in your power to do so is the right way to lead.

Irrespective of my leadership within these associations, I am not a politician. Never have been, never will be. I have been approached and invited to join political groups, but as they say in America, it is beyond my pay grade.

My leadership role model, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, is my hero. He desperately wanted development for South West Nigeria. He initiated free health care and education, even for his children. Thus, it wasn't some elitist situation where his children were schooling abroad, and the masses would have the public schools, although his first son did school in England. Additionally, he established the first television service in Africa, and all these were geared towards the betterment of his people. He was visionary.

### **My Proclivities in Architecture**

The management of FMA Associates, now FMA Architects, is to my credit. I'm skilled at coordinating and bringing together every necessary resource for projects, as well as harnessing skills to ensure that they are executed to the best standards. I grew FMA Architects into three architectural practices located in Lagos, Nigeria; Gaborone, Botswana; and Pretoria, South Africa. The Botswana firm has three partners, who also oversee the South African office. Both operate independently of the Lagos practice, which has four partners.

There are a couple of design projects that I take pride in, but there are others with which I'm not so pleased. People have hailed them as masterpieces, whereas they are imitations of buildings in Europe or New York. Honestly, I don't think that is what architecture is about. My architectural inclinations are Afro-centric, which is me trying to infuse some level of Africanness, if there is such a word, in my designs, something that the future generations can look at and relate to.

At Naraguta, on the outskirts of the University of Jos, we completed a design in which the residential buildings were modelled on the distinctive huts found in the surrounding environment.

Unfortunately, there are some Western-style designs as well. For instance, there is St Nicholas House, owned by my father, which accommodates my office in Lagos. My father also owned St Nicholas Hospital, and he named both buildings after St Nicholas,

the patron saint of children, as he himself was a paediatrician. An Italian architect, Boris, produced the basic design, which we subsequently completed.

I do not consider myself an exceptional designer – much as I wish I were – but I am, without doubt, an excellent manager.

Architecture should be about replicating the environment in the building, just like we did with the Naraguta project, not building the London House of Parliament in the middle of Ilorin or something. Occasionally, clients come and request that we adopt these designs.

Since its inception, FMA Architects has completed a range of projects spanning housing, shopping centres, office buildings, factories, mobile communications switch centres, hotels, and educational facilities.

## Building Designs by FMA Architects



Botswana International University of Science and Technology



Chevron Campus, Lekki, Lagos, Nigeria



Our Saviours' Church, Tafawa Balewa Square, Lagos, Nigeria.



Shrinan House, Botswana



GTBank Training School, Abeokuta, Nigeria



Twin Lakes Estate, Lekki, Lagos, Nigeria.



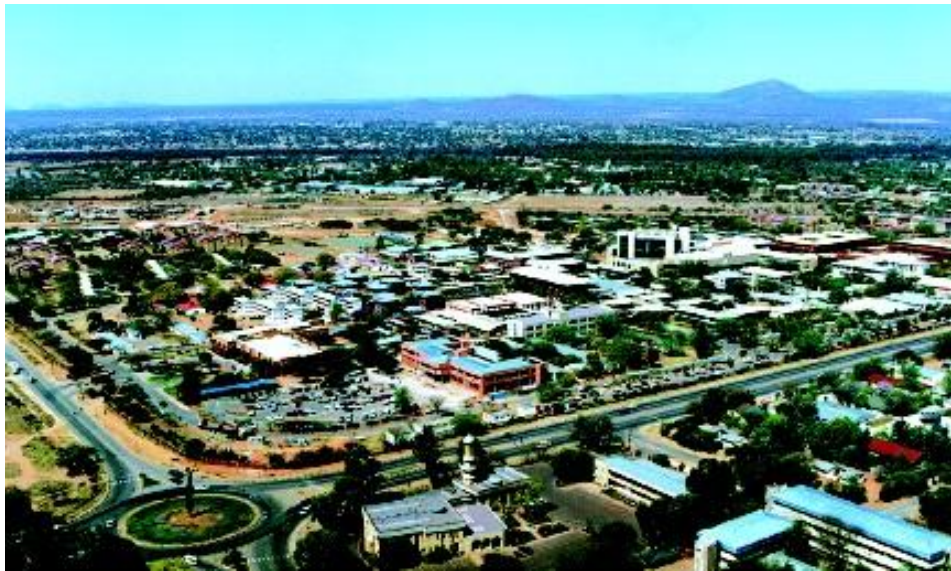
FBN Valley View Estate, Abuja, Nigeria



Sterling Bank Towers, Marina, Lagos, Nigeria



NAHCO Free Trade Zone, Muritala Muhammed International Airport, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria.



University of Botswana



Botswana Unified Revenue Service Headquarters Building



Federal Ministry of Finance, Abuja, Nigeria



South African High Commission, Abuja, Nigeria



Wheatbaker Hotel, Ikoyi, Lagos, Nigeria.



The architectural design of my Lagos residence reflecting my preferred style. It was so admired by my father that he requested it be replicated for his home in Abeokuta.

### **Becoming an Associate Professor**

John Godwin had been approached or offered himself as the case may be to teach *'Professional Practice'* to undergraduates at the Department of Architecture in the University of Lagos. He got there and was appalled by the quality, not only of the students but also, of the lecturers. Meaning to do something about it, he reached out to me and said, "Femi, can you come and help me?"

Of course, I asked why. Then, he replied with a hint of desperation, "Just to teach."

I felt it was an honour to be asked to teach. So, I consented. He introduced me to the school's faculty, and I became an Associate Professor and started to teach the students. I agreed with John Godwin that the quality was terrible. Certain lecturers I met, I wouldn't even employ in my office.

Perhaps it wasn't their fault. Many received substandard tutelage themselves. That was the best they could access at the time. I also co-opted other people, like Olumoroti Delano, and we tried our best.

Today, there are quite a few Nigerians who are not educators in architecture, but practitioners who are imparting knowledge within the university system. This is better because they are living it. In hindsight, that was exactly how I was trained.

The majority of lecturers in England were engaged in practical work. Their schedules weren't confined to an eight-hour day. They would arrive when they had lectures to deliver, and then return to their offices to continue their work. They were all actively involved professionals, deeply engaged in practical application.

My colleague and I shared teaching responsibilities. While one of us focused on preparing lectures and documentation, we jointly delivered the lectures, with the bulk of the preparation falling on his shoulders. However, there was an incident involving a student who struggled to articulate his thoughts in English while defending his work.

So, I asked the Head of the Department, "How did this young man get into the university, let alone get to the final year?" He replied and I'll never forget what he said, "You know, sir, some of them are children of lecturers, and it is difficult for us to turn them down. Thus, these students are simply being pushed up from one rung to another."

Sad to say, by virtue of their position, they were assured that they would one day qualify to practice. Although I have retired from teaching, I'd like to feel that I made meaningful impact.

Over and over again, you'd hear news of substandard buildings collapsing, and a lack of innovation in our nation's output. However, the quality of instruction is deficient. Several lecturers do not deserve to teach at all, let alone in an institution of higher learning. It is not the students' fault per se. It's just that they are not being properly tutored.

Currently, our universities are lacking not just in academic education but in imparting some social finesse to the students. There's no honour to being a Nigerian student anymore, unlike what obtained in the sixties. Many come from backgrounds that are not amenable to university life, and the institutions of higher learning lack the wherewithal to impart such knowledge.

Furthermore, there's too much politics in education, with the Academic Staff Union of Universities' (ASUU) frequent strikes, protests over insufficient pay, and the university environment becoming increasingly corrupt.

Then, we need to be realistic. Students go to universities and study courses that are of no use to the country or society as a whole. Our curricula and courses on offer should be reviewed and upgraded to be more relevant to the needs of the nation and the global environment. I think that we should go beyond the nomenclature of education to the necessity of it.

### **Growing Human Capital Over the Years**

One day, a young man walked into my office and introduced himself to me as Tunde Sholade. He had come all the way from Ibadan to see me because, according to him, he'd heard that I was one of the best architects in Lagos.

"I am an upcoming architect, and I crave your counsel. What do I have to do to make a success of my career?" he said. These enquiries are frequent, serving as a testament to the respect I have garnered within the profession.

Without a doubt, the presence of mentors accelerates your success. I have been fortunate to have had excellent mentors from diverse backgrounds. One such individual, the late Frank Mbanefo, stands out. Although considerably my senior, we shared a close bond; he was also a valued friend to me. Having been the pioneer Nigerian employee at Godwin and Hopwood, he'd gone on to set up his practice in 1964.

When his daughter married in Switzerland, I was honoured to chair the occasion. It is advisable to cultivate strong relationships with mentors who can serve as exemplars of success.



Architect Frank Mbanefo,  
a respected mentor and friend

Be tenacious. If there's anything worth doing, keep at it as much as you can, and never give up. Encourage people. Try to understand other people's feelings, irrespective of your own problems or difficult circumstances. Emotional intelligence is necessary for good leadership because you must be sensitive to the feelings of the people you lead and serve.

Successful professionals have been groomed through the systems set up within FMA Architects. These systems make for the emergence of talent and the celebration of our creative assets. One such system is our intra-office competition.

Architect Olajumoke Adenowo worked with us. I can't recall if I contacted her or vice versa, but I was highly impressed with her. She made a submission at our intra-office

competition, and her design was undeniably the best. The Federal Ministry of Finance building in Abuja still stands today as a testament to her competence.

She is an intelligent woman, unsurprisingly given her academic background - both her parents were professors. She often credits me as a mentor, which is a source of great pride. Her achievements since leaving FMA Associates are truly remarkable. She established her own successful practice, AD Consulting, and has even been recognised by prestigious outlets like the BBC and other international news networks for her architectural contributions.

To date, I encourage everyone who passes through me to set up their practice because that's what I did. Architect Olumoroti Delano is another one who passed through me. He is doing well as the Principal of Delano Architects, and he comes to visit me often.

While serving as an Associate Professor at the University of Lagos, I met a young man, one of my students, named Chukwudi Osakwe. During his final thesis, his initial submission was unsatisfactory, and all the lecturers criticised it accordingly. In response, he revised his work and ultimately produced something that impressed everyone.

I said to him, "It is not so much the work you submitted that impressed me, but your demonstration of tenacity. Chukwudi, if you wish, you are welcome to work with me." He remains with FMA Architects to this day.

There was also Omoyemi, who was in the same year as Chukwudi, along with several others who have since gone on to achieve considerable success. There are a good number of them who are successful.

The irony of this is that two of my senior staff members approached me about starting their practice. It is challenging to let go of staff with extensive experience because it is a bit of a depletion of your professional assets. So, they left. Unfortunately, their venture did not go as planned.

Six months later, they returned, having encountered disagreements that prevented them from functioning effectively as partners. I mediated their situation, and ultimately, they decided to go their separate ways.

At times, my influence on architects is exerted simply through moral and professional counsel; they don't need to work directly with my practice. I am passionate about the economic advancement of black architects. Many of us are doing well and should continue on our current paths. Why fix what isn't broken?

There are many black-owned architectural firms around the world. There's David Adjaye, the Ghanaian architect who is globally recognised for his exceptional work in architecture and was knighted by the Queen of England. With due modesty, there's me being the President of the International Union of Architects.

I would have upcoming architects understand that success is not being overt about becoming the best in the world. Simply be the best you can. Unfortunately, we blacks are our worst enemies. Sometimes, we can be very negative about the successes of others.

### **A Need to Raise the Bar**

In the course of living and in my travels, I have seen amazing places. As an architect, I have an eye for design and an awareness of the environment. Sprawling cities do not impress me as much as rural scenery and cultural establishment, or the efficiency with which places are run. My favorite country is Singapore because it is clean.

In Egypt, I enjoyed seeing the pyramids. Remarkably, in Mexico, they have some incredible pyramids as well, and it's not general knowledge. When my wife and I went to Tokyo, we were disappointed. We were expecting much more. China was a little better. We were in the Three Gorges and, of course, the Great Wall.

In other parts of the world, for instance, in Africa, on a visit to Zimbabwe, at Monomotapa, we saw the old walls which reflect the remnants of ancient civilisation.

Stonehenge in England is also notable. I enjoyed places like that. You'd wonder how they were able to construct those structures. Some of them are not actually man-made; they are natural.

Europe has notable structures, well preserved through history, but Africa also has impressive architecture passed down from our predecessors. Nigeria used to boast of a few.

Take the city of Lagos, for instance. Had I not known the city in its earlier days, I would scarcely believe this is the same place. In the 1940s, Tinubu Square featured a functioning fountain donated by the Lebanese community. Such amenities enhanced the surroundings and helped to cool the area. Today, central Lagos is in disarray.

Some designs reflected significant events in our nation's history. One of these was the Ilojo Bar, originally named Casa do Fernande and later referred to as Olaiya House in Tinubu Square. It was actually built by returning Nigerian slaves from Brazil. Such a structure would have been preserved as a historical monument and enriched the city's tourist attractions.

Having stood for well over a century, it would have served as a significant reference point for the skills, cultural exchanges, and influences introduced into our environment through the slave trade. But unfortunately, somebody went and pulled it down because they wanted to develop the area.

My employers, Godwin and Hopwood, were extremely distraught because they admired the building and saw it as a true reflection of the craftsmanship of Nigerian slaves who were trained as builders in Brazil and later brought those skills back to Lagos. I was also very fond of the building. It is sad that it's no longer there.

## THE LAGOS I GREW UP IN



Casa do Fernande or Ilojo Bar, later referred to as Olaiya House in Tinubu Square. In the background, is one of the buildings by Godwin and Hopwood,



Tinubu Square in the 1940s, featuring a fountain donated by the Lebanese community.



Jaekel House, a historic colonial building within the Nigerian Railway compound in Ebute Metta, Lagos. I admire the architectural aesthetics of the period, when burglar bars were not in use.

Today, in architecture, everyone is trying to look like everybody else. For any building on Broad Street or in Pretoria, I can show you twenty more like them. There's so much imitation. When we develop the evolution for making our livable spaces more conducive to our conditions of life, I believe it will be so much better.

Even if we want to copy, we should do so leaning towards designs that are relevant to our cultural heritage and way of life. Imitating more of what our forebears did in our modern works evokes something in us that preserves our heritage.

What I admire about Arabs is that they are innovative. There's a certain element of copying, but with a twist. They have this thing called *The Line*, a smart city in Neom, Saudi Arabia, which is currently under construction. It has been designed to be a green city with no carbon emissions, cars, or streets in it.

They want to build two mirrored buildings 170 kilometres long, and it will be powered by renewable energy and artificial intelligence. Looking to accommodate nine million people, you can live, work, and recreate there and it will be no more than a five to fifteen minute walk to anywhere you need to go.

*The Line* goes right across the desert. They are using technology the way it should be used. It is futuristic, and it would be fantastic if they could pull it off. Our architecture should raise the bar.

Often, I worry about Africa and our state of underdevelopment. If all the authorities that should know about man's origin state that Africa is the cradle of civilisation, why then is our level of technology and innovation so low compared to that of the white man?

Could it be that the cold weather rewired their brains for invention, and we black people just sit and watch and consume what they produce? But then, I see a revolution now where blacks are beginning to come up. Even though we are starting to thrive in Europe and America, it is all very well to do these things in the West; what is happening in Africa? That worries me.

Was God partial, or what? I would have loved to study anthropology because I am interested in the origin of the species. Perhaps it would have answered some of my questions.



In the lobby of the InterContinental Hotel in Seoul, South Korea, upon arrival for a General Assembly of the International Union of Architects. A monk approached to request a photograph with me, having assumed – by my attire – that I too was a monk from Nigeria.

## 6.

### LIFE'S PEAKS AND SUNSETS

My wife, Victoria, liked flowers. She was a member of the Royal Horticultural Society in England, and they had a school called the Physic Garden. She went there to study flowers, especially when she was in England for the children's half-term. I took a liking to flowers as well, so when we were about to build our home in Lagos forty years ago, she said she wanted a garden, and I said that I wanted a swimming pool. That way, we both had what we wanted built into the house.

While building the house, I intentionally incorporated elements in the architecture to maximise natural light and ventilation. Burglar bars are prevalent in Nigeria due to security concerns, but I dislike them. They detract from the building's aesthetic appeal. Consequently, I left them out of my design for the most part.

People may question the wisdom in that, but my perspective is that while material possessions may be enticing to thieves, they hold little significance compared to the safety of my family and myself. Reflecting on the essence of life, I find no need to flaunt my wealth through ostentatious displays. It's worth noting that both my father and grandfather were affluent individuals. I see people who like to show off with expensive cars and all, but I know the measure of myself. But, I digress - back to Victoria.

My wife provided unwavering support throughout my travels and career. She was always a comforting presence to return home to, offering valuable advice along the way. Her creative inputs are all over the house, things I never imagined could be in a home. She said to me when we were building the house, "Look, I want a cupboard for the linen. Every house I go to, there never seems to be a cupboard for the linen."

As a result, we incorporated a special linen cupboard upstairs and three storerooms. We also love art and as a result, purchased paintings and indigenous crafts like Benin and Yoruba carvings.



Our garden—Victoria's and mine—on the first-floor terrace of my Lagos residence.



Selected works from my Benin Kingdom art collection



One of the paintings in my collection.



One of the paintings in my collection.

My wife managed our home with great care, excelling in cooking, nurturing the children's values, and maintaining a well-ordered household. Our home became a welcoming haven for visitors. I am given to hospitality, though my wife thought I was eccentric for enjoying throwing parties.

Victoria was an amazing mother. She taught our daughter and stewards how to cook. Adefolarin, our second son, was proficient in cooking and tailoring in his early years. He used to make his clothes when he was much younger. My wife was the best thing that happened to me, and thankfully, my father liked her. They got along well, and she tried to make him a born-again Christian. I don't know how successful she was at it.



From left to right: Adefolarin, my second son; Victoria, my wife; and Akintunde, my youngest son.

A most fulfilling recollection of her brings a smile to my face. It was of me seeing her last child born because I was there in the room at the Catholic Hospital in London. She was to have an epidural because of the pain of the previous three pregnancies. Epidurals can be life-threatening. Therefore, I requested that I be in the room, and the doctor obliged.

So, I was gowned and restricted to mopping her forehead during the procedure. She was in pain. When the baby was out, the doctor asked me, "Don't you want to see your son?" And it was an odd feeling because, to me, he was a stranger. I was more concerned about my wife. Of course, they eventually brought the baby, whom we named Akintunde.

That encounter led me to the firm belief that men should be present in the delivery room, alongside the mothers of their children. It hits differently when you experience the rigour that women go through to birth a child, and it is a fantastic and fulfilling feeling to be able to support in easing their discomfort.

Despite the frequent absences necessitated by my work, I made every effort to be present and involved as a husband and father whenever I returned home. I am family-oriented. Nevertheless, I had to make money to pay the bills and give my children a comfortable life and quality education. Particularly because Victoria stopped work to take care of the home front, I strove to live up to my promise to ensure they lacked nothing. I promised her that she would never lack anything that I could afford to give her, and she never did.

Victoria travelled with me quite a lot and was liked and appreciated by all the architects and dignitaries we met on our trips. She was quiet and smiled often. When I was the President of the International Union of Architects, we used to have meetings in various countries in the world, and this happened every six months. At the same time, I was obligated to visit various countries if they had problems.

On other occasions, I was invited to dedicate a school or building, one project or the other. Sometimes, I'd be required to write a letter to the President of a country, on behalf of the members of the union. So, when I travelled in such a representative capacity, I took Victoria along, and when we went on vacations, it was a family affair.

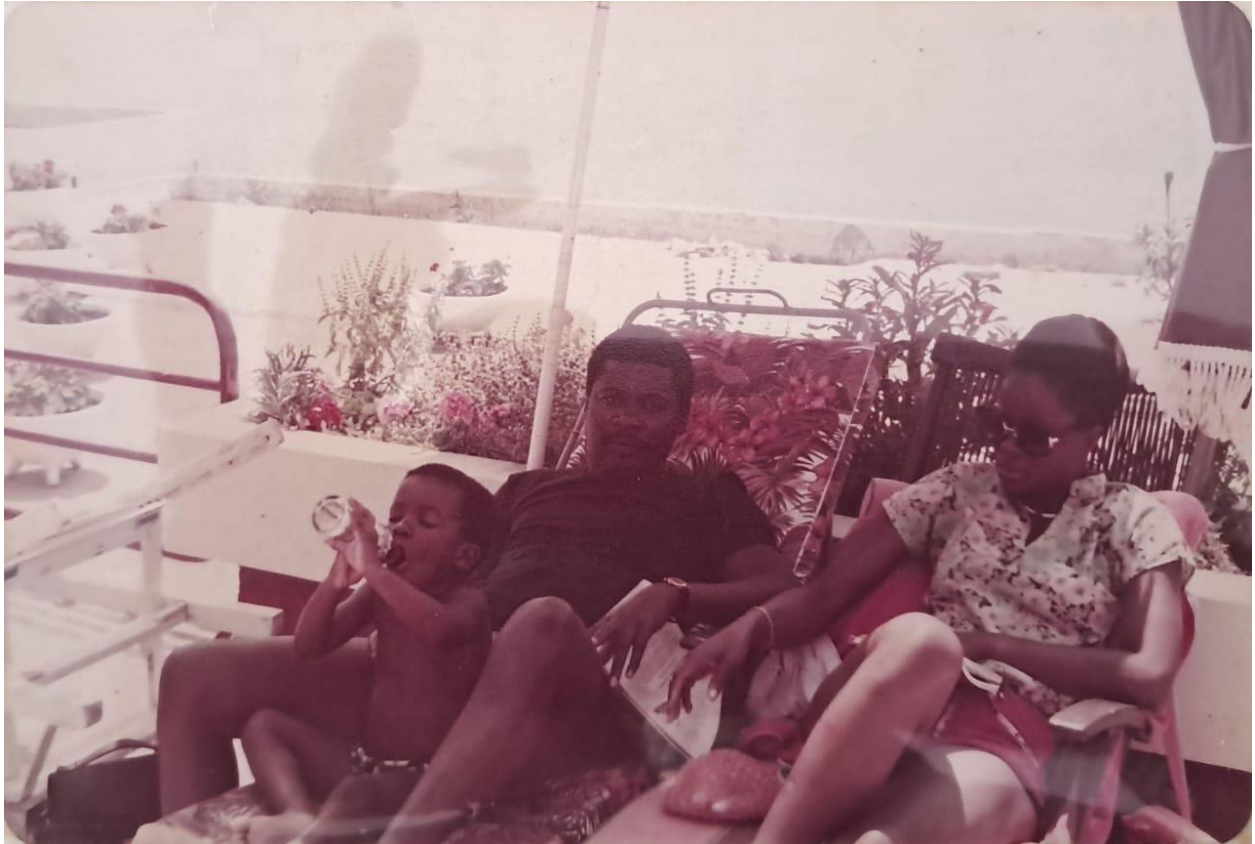
Like most people who love adventure, we had a bucket list of places to explore on our trips. To the delight of my children when they were little, we went to Disneyland and travelled on the Concord. Romantic destinations were not left out. We have been on two cruises – one to the Caribbean and the other, a cruise that included a trip to the Falkland Islands.

For the first time, I saw penguins, which I had never seen before except in pictures. My children love animals, especially dogs. We used to have a monkey, a tortoise, and a deer in the garden. We would feed them and rub them up. We have made some great memories as a family, and I provided the best I could without having to steal money to afford it.



Victoria and I, on a holiday trip to San Francisco, with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background.





A moment of family relaxation at one of the Greek Islands, Skiathos: Deji, myself and Victoria.

My children, though adults now, still have a fantastic relationship with me; they ask for advice and seek my opinion on certain subjects. They solicit my perspective.

A while back, my daughter asked me about what I thought on a matter she was dealing with, and I replied, "Look, my dear, you have to make your own decisions sometimes." She protested anxiously, "But daddy, suppose I fail? Suppose it doesn't work?"

"Well then, you try again," I encouraged her. "I can tell you how not to live your life, but I can't tell you how to live your life. Yes, of course, there'll be failures, there'll be things that you do that just won't work out. You either change your tack, or you try again till you get it right."

## **Having a Child Out of Wedlock**

Our marriage wasn't all sunshine and roses. There were challenges along the way. I met this medical student and got friendly with her. She was the only child of her mother. They were Muslims. Her mother was a trader and was concerned about her daughter getting older and not being married. When she got to know about our relationship, she encouraged it.

She got pregnant. Reality set in, and I was unhappy about the situation. It was a sticky situation, and I was worried about my wife's reaction. I did not want to hurt her feelings with the knowledge that I had a child out of wedlock.

The lady's mother said, "Tell you what, we won't even name the child Majekodunmi. We have enough money to train the child. We will call her by our name." To that, I said, "No! If it's my child, it's mine."

I informed my father about it and he said, "What do you want to do?"

"I want to tell my wife," I replied. "She doesn't deserve this. I feel very bad about it."

We waited till the baby was born on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1986, and she looked like me. My family's genes had left their signature stamp on her features, and there was no doubt that she was mine. She was a lovely girl.

On the eighth day, my father sent his sisters to attend her naming ceremony. She was named Moronkeji Majekodunmi, and she grew up to become an architect, as is my first son. I treat her equally as all my other children. She lived with her mother and was educated in England. I did not want her to go through the trauma that I went through. I visited her often and even went to her school. Today, she's married with two children of her own.

The deed was done, and I did own up to my mistake. I had to go out on a limb and tell my wife. I flew to London, where she was at the time, and broke the news to her. That was a rocky season in our marriage. As you would imagine, she wasn't happy about it.

As far as I can remember, I had to live under the cloud of that for a while. There were constant reminders from her. She would make comments like, *“Eh hen! Go now, go and bring another child from another woman.”*

It was mandatory that I inform all my children about their new sibling. I relayed my desire that they get along with her, which they have to date. I did not have it easy as a child, and did not want any of my children to feel neglected. I pleaded with them to be loving and accommodating. I try to treat them all the same, even in terms of my will and their education.

## My Children



From left to right on the upper row: Adefolarin, Olufunke, and Akintunde. Seated in front is Ayodeji.



My daughter, Moronkeji Majekodunmi.



Moronkeji, my last daughter who is also an architect, with her husband, Banji Malik.

### **On Leisure**

Cicero said, “The task of the educated mind is simply put: read to lead.”

One of my teachers at St. Gregory’s College, Father Conroy, used to take me to Kingsway on Saturdays, and we would buy Penguin books. He would buy half a dozen Penguin books on a Saturday and be done reading them by Sunday night. He was a voracious reader and an early influence in whetting my appetite for books.

My brother, Koye, was a fast reader, while I am much slower. There was a book called ‘*Hawaii*,’ and he read it in a week, which I thought was fantastic. I used to be really into

reading books, but these days, I find myself spending more time on the internet, engrossed in shorter reads. Despite having a pile of books awaiting my attention, I'm uncertain when I'll manage to dive into them. Recently, I read an exceptional book titled "*The Alchemist*."

Additionally, I have a keen interest in business literature and the works of esteemed authors such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. Comparatively, I regard Achebe as the superior writer, with his works often quoted internationally. Soyinka's latest publication, "*You Must Wake Up At Dawn*," caught my attention, especially since my aunt was mentioned in it as one of Mrs. Kuti's companions. Historical books also interest me, and I've got one called "*The History of the Yorubas*" by my bedside.

Mary Trump, Donald Trump's niece, wrote a book: "*Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man*". In it, she shares her family's dysfunctions, and her dislike for her uncle, Donald Trump, is glaring. I read that cover to cover.

My father liked biographies, historical books, and poetry, and I used to buy them for him. We would sit to analyse the content and context of the books. I must say that my father was one of the most intelligent people I ever met. Perhaps, due to the quality of our discourse - I admired his perspectives in our conversations - I'm drawn to intelligent folks who challenge my thinking.

### **Koye's Death**

I loved my brother, Koye, very much. As children of Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi, we both suffered from being short of money. Our father was strict with all his children, and as a result, we shared the little we had with each other. Though he was well off, he did not indulge us.

Years down the line, in adulthood, Koye died of cancer of the pancreas. I was distraught.



From left to right: Myself, my cousin Joko Olunloyo, my late immediate brother Koye, Muazu Abdul-Maliki, and my sister, Shade..



Desmond Majekodunmi, my brother, who is now an environmentalist and media personality



My dear brother, Dr. Dapo and his wife, Umola.



My dear sister, Folake, and her husband, Dayo Akinkugbe.



My dear brother, Kofo, and his wife, Omowunmi



My father at 90 with family members.

### **Bidding My Father Goodbye**

My father associated with influential figures across the globe, but he was never given to extravagance. On his seventieth birthday, we, his children, told Leventis to bring three different Mercedes cars to the house because that was the dominant brand at the time. We said, "Papa, we want to give you a car. All these beat-up cars you are driving need to be replaced with something befitting." "Okay," he said. Then, he looked at all of them and asked about their features.

"This is Mercedes 280, the biggest one," someone said.

“No, no, no,” he balked. “It looks like a coffin.” He rejected that one and settled for the Mercedes 200. That’s what he drove until he died. I remember saying to him once, “Papa, buy a Rolls Royce.” And he asked, “Why?” So, he believed in modest opulence, and that did rub off on me.

My father was proficient both as a professional and in the Creative Arts. When he was a medical officer with Nigerian Medical Services in Calabar, in 1944, he wrote a play titled “*Behold, the Key.*” This he did to address the tragic consequences of harmful practices of indigenous communities, such as: female genital mutilation during circumcision, burning children’s limbs supposedly in a bid to wake them up; and putting pepper in children’s eyes. J.P. Clark, the renowned playwright reproduced the play over forty years later, in 1989.

We had our good moments in relation to each other. He had his flaws, but he was a good man. There were many things I couldn’t understand about him. Unquestionably, he was competent and accomplished in his profession; however, I think he was rather weak on his emotional side. He would like to think that he was strong and gave that impression, but that was not really the case, especially regarding his women. I’m not that strong myself because I know men who say that no woman can tell them what to do. Many supposedly strong men have women calling the shots in their lives.

When he was close to his departure from earth, I visited him, and he said to me, “When I am gone, this is what I want you to write on my epitaph.” So, he took a piece of paper and penned his desired quote.

On another visit, he just looked at me and said, “What sort of coffin are you going to bury me in?” He wasn’t sick or anything. He was ninety-five years old and had started planning his burial. I stopped for a moment and replied, “I don’t know, sir, but I can tell you the coffin I buried my mother in. It was a wooden coffin, nothing fancy.” I do not admire the excesses of gold trappings.

“That is perfect. Just bury me in a wooden coffin, please,” he said, aligning with my preference for simplicity.

He was organised and knew precisely where he wished to be buried – within our church compound in Abeokuta, alongside his father. We had agreed upon the location of his grave; however, at that time, there was a restriction on burials within the church grounds due to limited space. It appeared that many desired to be buried in a churchyard, which was entirely understandable. Accordingly, we required special permission from the Bishop, whom I approached, and explained, “My father is in his late nineties and wishes to be buried on the church grounds.”

He responded, “Ah, your grandfather was instrumental in building the church, and your father also contributed significantly. There is no objection; we will make a special exception for your father.” The church, Holy Trinity Church, Ikereku, Abeokuta, features three towers symbolising the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. My grandfather constructed two towers, while my father built the third.



Holy Trinity Church, Ikereku, Ogun State, Nigeria.

On the day my father died, I was in my house in Lagos when I received a call from my younger brother, Dapo, who is a medical doctor. He was with my father at his home in

Ikoyi. We all visited my father occasionally, so he had been to see him. “Brother Femi,” he said over the phone, “... daddy is going.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed softly, retaining my calm. Somehow, I didn’t want to have a knee-jerk reaction by jumping up and running off. There was nothing I could do. So, I said, “When he is dead, let me know.” Then, I went off the call and waited. A few minutes later, he called and said, “He’s gone.”



My father, Chief. Dr. Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi,  
the Otun of Egba.

I drove to his house and went to his room. His wife, my second stepmother, was in the next room, and she wasn't feeling very well either. His body was half seated in the bed, reclining against the pillows. "Please leave me alone with him for a few minutes," I requested of my brother.

He got up and left the room. I placed my hand on my father's head and prayed for him. "May God forgive you of your sins, and take you to heaven with Him." There were no tears.

I have rarely cried at the deaths of people. Well, except for my good friend, Segun Awolowo, Obafemi Awolowo's son. He studied Law at Cambridge. We were part of a group of friends in England, young rascals, and he was a year older than me. We used to gamble and chase girls. We had this joke where I would say to him, "Look, you'd better be careful, otherwise, you'd get restricted."

This was because, during my father's tenure as Administrator of the Western Region, he placed Chief Obafemi Awolowo under what could be described as a 'house arrest' for political reasons. Despite their political differences, we, the children, remained friends, and when my father's mother passed away, Chief Awolowo attended the funeral in Abeokuta. On that occasion, Chief Awolowo even joked with him, saying, "Ah, Moses, you are a wicked man. They told you to restrict me, and you went and put me in Lekki. The mosquitoes were enormous!"

"Ah! That's not true," my father responded. "I deliberately asked them to restrict you to Lekki because there was a lovely guest house by the beach, and I told them to lodge you there because it was most suitable." This had happened in 1963. So, they joked about it and didn't make a big deal of it.

When I heard of Segun's death in a car crash, I cried. I was still studying at Kingston, and he had only recently graduated and returned to Nigeria. His death was tragic and shocking to me.

## **My Mother's Transition**

After I got married and had two children, my wife and I visited my mother and her daughter, Gladys in Sierra Leone. We developed a relationship, and after her husband died, she came to live with me in Lagos. I had no choice, as I was her only son and my sister was married in England.

Interestingly, my sister didn't get along with our mother as they were both always quarreling. Mother would be intent on visiting her in London, and sometimes, I would attempt to dissuade her because ultimately, they would call me to settle one issue or the other.

Despite living with me, she was not inclined towards fostering family ties, and we didn't really get along either. In contrast, my father's family is very family-oriented. My grandfather had four wives. He lived in the Lion building, while his wives lived in the quarters. Each wife had a suite. But, when it came to eating, the wives would cook the food, bring it up to Baba upstairs, and he would call all the grandchildren and the children of the servants to eat first before the children in the family and the adults would be served.

When we had eaten to our satisfaction, he would take off his signature cap and give us all coins to buy whatever we wanted. Fast food is a recent phenomenon. Delicious smells from the bubbling oil in local frying pans triggered salivation and heightened the expectations of our taste buds.

We would strut off happily to the women selling crispy fried yams and hot *akara*. Such was the attraction of street food. The point is that Baba cared for everyone under his care, both the children and the servants. This was also a point of contention between me and my wife, Victoria, because she came from a conservative Christian background.

A certain lady stayed with us and served us for several years. One day, she snagged her leg on a glass table and was bleeding, so I took some iodine and applied first aid to the wound. My wife cautioned me, "You don't have to do that."

“But she’s bleeding, I’m sorry,” I interjected. Victoria believed that the servants should keep their place, and we should set boundaries. Fortunately for me, I embraced the culture of extending love and kindness to all, irrespective of their social standing, and I learned this from my grandfather. My father was not quite like that.

My mother had a friend named Mrs. Okagwe, who hailed from Sierra Leone and was married to an Igbo gentleman from Nigeria. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they shared a close friendship. My mother had lived in Sierra Leone because my grandmother schooled there, having attended the prestigious school for girls, Annie Walsh.

Upon her return to Nigeria following the passing of my stepfather, she and Mrs. Okagwe established a routine of visiting the market on Saturday mornings to procure food ingredients. Then, they would cook meals to their liking at Mrs. Okagwe’s house.

During one of my trips abroad, one Saturday morning, Mrs. Okagwe drove to our house for their usual appointment. She alighted and walked in, expecting to find her friend all dressed and ready for the market. “Where’s Tomi?” she enquired. “Oh, she’s still in the bedroom,” someone replied.

“Go and tell her that I am here,” she said and sat in the parlour to wait for her to emerge from her room.

Well, after about half an hour of waiting, they went into my mother’s room and found her in a fetal position. She was dead. I was then told, and I had to return home as quickly as possible.



My dear mother, Mrs. Olutomi Inniss. She was a fashionista and enjoyed dressing well.

*Celebration of Life*  
**Funeral and Communion Service**



**For the late**  
**EBUNOLUWA GLADYS CONTEH**

**Died: December, 15<sup>th</sup> 2018.**  
 @ Bishop Baughman United Methodist Church  
 (Brookfields)  
 On Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2019

  
 @ 2:00 pm

Aged:  
**61** yrs

**Internment at Ascension Town Cemetery.**

My younger sister by my mother, Ebunoluwa Gladys Conteh. She died in 2018, leaving two children.

## **The Most Difficult Farewell to the Love of My Life**

Over the years, Victoria and I grew old together. We are blessed with four children and thirteen grandchildren. Sadly, Victoria later became ill with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy in an effort to treat it. Eventually, the cancer metastasised to her lungs, and the doctors informed us that nothing more could be done.

She subsequently remained at home in London with a nurse to support her. It was a difficult year marked by profound suffering, and I stayed by her side throughout, providing care and support.

On the afternoon of March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023, I went to the pharmacy to buy morphine for her, to help dull the pain. My daughter was with her in the house. My phone rang, and I picked it up. It was my daughter. *"Daddy, mommy is gone!"* she said. My world came crashing down.

I rushed home to find an ambulance outside our apartment, and the doctors were there. My heart raced with dread, and I hurried to her room. She was lying there, looking so peaceful, like she was sleeping. Could she be dead? They must be mistaken. She looked so alive that I had difficulty accepting that she was dead. I knelt by her side and kissed her on the forehead and on the lips.

Her body was warm, and I asked my daughter who was with me, *"Are you sure she's dead? She's alright. She's sleeping."*

One of my sons had arrived, so he helped me to my feet. My heart wanted to hold on to her, and I repeatedly asked the doctors, *"Are you sure she's dead? She's okay. She's sleeping."*

Sadly, my daughter softly said, *"No, daddy. She's gone."* The lady who came to the house with the ambulance sympathised with me, *"Sorry, sir. She is dead."*

The finality of death!

That was the saddest moment of my life. My daughter hugged me, trying to be strong for me. I knew she was trying to come to terms with it as well because she was shuddering badly.

I regret that Victoria is dead now. The first few months after her passing were very difficult for me. Still is. I mourn her still. I find myself crying sometimes. Things happen, and I think to myself, "Oh my God, if only Victoria were here, I'd just tell her. She'd know what to do."

Sometimes, I go to an event, and someone greets me, and I say, "Ah, how are you?" but I can't remember who it is. If she were around, I'd ask, "Who is that?" She knew everybody. She was a wonderful wife, mother, and sister. She was a wonderful woman. I miss her companionship.

I wasn't the perfect husband. We had our quarrels. She had this instinctive understanding of men. At a party, I'd go around and greet all the women and return to where we were seated, and she'd look at me accusatorily, "Eh hen! Typical man. You greeted everybody, except your girlfriend."

Defensively, I'd innocently protest, "But I greeted everybody."

And she would retort, "No, you didn't greet that one."

"Oh! It must have been a mistake," I'd say.

Then, she'd make a face. "I was watching you. You greeted that one, and that one. Then, you skipped this one," she'd point out. I do miss her a lot. Together, we created a wholesome family experience.



I and Victoria with our children, some of their spouses, and eight of the thirteen grandchildren in 2014.



## DRAWING THE CURTAINS

My office walls are lined with several membership and award plaques, but they are not things that I overtly pursued or desired. Once you attain a certain level of achievement, accolades start piling up. I don't know that I deserve them all. Fame and wealth pale in comparison to life's true assets. What's most rewarding is the time spent with my children and grandchildren.

Often, I say to them, "Give your children the best possible education, because they are going to be the joys of your life in your old age." I look forward to their visits or times when we go out together. Those are the joys of life. It gladdens my heart to know that my children are not criminals or drug addicts. So, hopefully I can die peacefully.

I share with you a closing paragraph in a note from my eldest son:

*In closing daddy, you are loved by all your children. The people you have generously helped or gifted will still appreciate and be grateful to you with less generous receipts. I felt I had to write this down since yesterday, after viewing your Barclays account. I have been very worried to see such little funds remaining.*

*God bless you dad. Much love.*

*Your son.*

That's sort of a typical message from my children.

I am generous to my children for the purpose of my grandchildren's education because what I enjoy in the twilight of my life is seeing my grandchildren, and this is a blessing. It can be disheartening if your children and grandchildren are not on the same page as you. Conversely, having a warm relationship with them is rewarding, and I want this for everybody. Maybe I was expecting too much, but I wish I had the same kind of relationship with my parents.



In my office

Each one of my children is unique. Olufunke is a strong but quiet lady. She attended one of the best girls' schools in England, Roedean in Brighton. Irrespective of the extent of exposure and educational standards we bequeathed to our children, the greater investment is having a sense of humility and contentment. We were determined to inculcate the right values in our children; therefore, we ensured that every holiday, they all came to Nigeria.

One time, in my father-in-law's house in Benin, she was sitting outside with some of the local children playing, and someone came to visit and said, "Oh, where is your daughter, the one that goes to Roedean?" We pointed her out and the person was amazed. "She's sitting on the ground?"

“Yes,” we said. Expressing the typical expectation of the privileged to be condescending, the individual said with an air of disappointment, “Ah! How can she be sitting down with the local children?”

We replied categorically, “Well, that’s how we want it.”

Like her mother, she possesses a deep faith and has strong Christian virtues. Wole Soyinka’s book, *You Must Get Up At Dawn*, features a character he referred to as a ‘wild Christian’ – typical of Wole Soyinka. Not that my wife was wild, but the terminology reminds me of her passion for Christianity. My wife’s Christian values were unparalleled, and I didn’t agree with her on everything.

Olufunke is a bit like that. She is also a good wife and mother who takes care of her four sons. Occasionally, she supports me in decision-making when it comes to leading the family. She continues to be a good daughter, and for that I am grateful to God.



From left to right: Ayodeji, my first son; Victoria, my wife; Olufunke; and myself, at a dinner event at Olufunke's school, Roedean School for Girls, Brighton, East Sussex.



Olufunke with her mother-in-law on the day of her engagement to Christian.

My eldest son, Ayodeji, has earned the nickname, *The Gentle Giant*, from those who meet him. He is over six feet tall, yet possesses a quiet demeanor that makes him instantly likable. Even my father considered him a fantastic young man. We are good friends. He is straightforward and honest, a trait shared by all my children, actually.

He has carved a successful career in Architecture, becoming one of the four partners at FMA Architects in Lagos. Interestingly, we both hold degrees from Kingston College of Arts, now Kingston University. In 1970, the College of Arts and the College of Technology merged to become Kingston Polytechnic. Subsequently, in 1992, it became Kingston

University. Ayodeji is married with three children, and is doing quite well in his profession.

My second son, Adefolarin, is married to a German lady. Both he and his wife possess exceptional intellect. He completed his undergraduate studies at Imperial College and pursued a Ph.D. at King's College, London. Adefolarin holds his alma mater, Imperial College, in the highest esteem, even ranking it above renowned institutions such as Oxford.

I vividly recall a lunch I was having with two friends in Southampton when my phone rang. It was Adefolarin, his voice brimming with excitement. "Daddy, I got it!" he exclaimed.

Curiosity piqued, I inquired, "Got what?"

"My Ph.D. results just came in!" he announced.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, recognising this as a momentous occasion certainly worthy of celebration. I promptly ordered a bottle of champagne to mark the achievement.

Akintunde, my third son, pursued his undergraduate studies at Leeds University Business School, followed by his postgraduate education at Bayes Business School. His focus was on Accountancy, and he subsequently ventured into entrepreneurship, establishing his own business. He is doing well in his endeavours.

I am immensely proud of them all. My constant admonition to them has been to always live within their means, regardless of the financial security I have tried to provide for them. They must study to be content and kind to people because this will serve them throughout their lives.

Acts of kindness are not solely beneficial to the receiver, but to the giver as well. A person's generosity releases the feel good chemicals, serotonin, and oxytocin, into their system. Psychological studies have shown that serotonin enhances mood, while oxytocin strengthens immunity.

Supporting worthy causes creates avenues for enriching lives and enabling the realisation of people's aspirations. Through the initiatives of the Moses Adekoyejo Majekodunmi Foundation, the Lions Club, and the Church, I can contribute to such charitable work.

In addition, I provide support to the Nigerian Institute of Architects. I find fulfilment in serving humanity without seeking public recognition. It is deeply rewarding to play a role in fostering positive outcomes for others. One should strive to be instrumental in ensuring that good things happen to people.

The most rewarding part of my career is that I made a success of it and reached the pinnacle of my profession. As I mentioned previously, I am an enabler of men, and I believe we should all aspire to be that in some way. There are heights that you may be unable to attain yourself, but urge someone towards their goals. In enabling people's aspirations, I strive to offer encouragement if I can and help to refine their ideas for better results.

Looking back through my life's journey, I have been a privileged recipient of the kindness of men. I'm really thankful for all the support I've had.

First and foremost, I had my wife's backing in my professional pursuits. Victoria was my biggest supporter. Then, I'm grateful to my stepmother, Nora, who stepped in and provided the motherly care I needed when I was young. She loved me without condition and helped me discover my career path.

Also, my father was there for me, offering advice and financial assistance for my education and ventures. I owe a lot to my aunts on my father's side, and my maternal and paternal grandmothers, too. They all played a big part in shaping who I am today.

John Godwin and his wife, Gill, were incredibly kind to me as well. John was a stellar example of what an employer and mentor should be.



John Godwin

### **Long Serving Staff**

I don't like firing people. Several of my staff members have remained loyal to me for many years. Every decade, I make it a point to commemorate their dedication. Alhaji Rashidi Olasukomi Ojo exemplifies this commitment. He served me faithfully for fifty-one years, from 1972 to 2023, commencing his employment at the age of eighteen as a professional driver.

My wife, Victoria, needed a driver to take her to the market and assist with other necessary errands because she was pregnant and unable to drive. At the same time, I had to focus on my fledgling business as an entrepreneur. I remember wondering how we were going to manage our logistics.

That was when I hired Rashidi. His salary was about £19 a month in Nigerian pounds at the time. My wife looked at him and said, "This small boy is not going to drive me."

I replied, "Well, I cannot afford anything more than that, and since you cannot drive, while I am at work and you need to go to the market, Rashidi will take you there. You will simply have to manage with him."

And indeed, she did.

As time went on, Victoria established herself as a florist. She opened a shop called Victoria Gardens and Flowers at No. 2, Baiudo Street, off Keffi Street in Ikoyi. She also ran a farm located in Ijuri Village, Igbesa, near Agbara Estate in Ogun State, where she cultivated the flowers she sold.

She was a very modest woman. Towards the end of her life, she no longer owned a car but instead used a van because it was more practical for transporting flowers and supporting the business.

Over the years, Rashidi became far more than a driver. He was literally her business manager because he knew every aspect of its operations, and the enterprise prospered under his dependable support. Victoria eventually obtained her own driving license, but Rashidi continued to drive her while helping oversee the business.

He also displayed remarkable honesty. I remember when Arisekola was selling Peugeots in Ibadan. I wanted to buy one, so I telephoned him to say that I would send my driver to collect it. I gave Rashidi four thousand naira in cash and sent him to purchase a brand-new Peugeot 404 on my behalf. He travelled to Ibadan, paid for the car, and drove it safely back to Lagos.

After he had worked with us for about forty years, I said to him, "Rashidi, you have been exceptionally faithful. In all your years of service, you never stole anything. What can I do for you?"

He replied, "I want to go to Mecca," as he is, of course, a Muslim. I decided immediately that I would pay for the trip. When I informed my wife of my decision, she was not entirely pleased about it. However, I have always believed that every individual is entitled to their faith. Besides, there were Muslims on both sides of our family, both hers and mine.

I eventually persuaded her. I said, "Look, Rashidi has worked for you and managed your business for forty years, all while remaining a Muslim. Has he ever done anything that caused you regret?"

"No," she replied.

"That is the way life ought to be," I said. And so, we sent him to Mecca.

When my wife died in 2023, Rashidi was deeply distraught. He came to me and said, "Oga, I do not think I have a job anymore. Madam is gone."

Sadly, I replied, "Rashidi, that is the end of the work. Why don't you take Madam's van as a gift? In addition, your pension will be that you come every month to collect your salary, but you will no longer need to work."

Rashidi quite literally grew up in my employment. When he first came to us, he was unmarried. In time, he got married and had two children – and he's a grandfather. Today, he is settled on his own. During his years with us, he managed to build a house in his village, and I believe we were also able to secure one of the Jakande flats in Lagos for him.

That, in essence, is the story of Rashidi.



Rashidi, my wife's driver and business manager, alongside his wife.

Isa initially served as a security detail for my late father. Following my father's passing, I retained him as my personal security detail. He's been with me for more than ten years now, always by my side wherever I go. Similarly, Agnes, our cook, was an integral part of our household for twelve years, but she returned to Ghana after my wife's demise.

We are fortunate to have numerous employees like Alhaji Rashidi, Isa, and Agnes, whose unwavering loyalty and dedication have endured over time. There are decent people in the world, and I have been fortunate to meet many of them.

### **Adenike, the Girl with the Prosthetic Hand**

One day, a young girl with a twisted hand made me abandon a television I had purposed to buy, at the checkout counter.

Here's what happened. Flat-screen televisions had just become fashionable then. They were slim, elegant, and quite expensive. You could hang them on the wall like framed photographs, and I had decided that I wanted one for my house. So, I drove to The Palms Shopping Mall in Lagos, walked around the electronics stores, and eventually found one that I liked.

It ran into hundreds of thousands of naira, but I thought to myself, "Why not?"

I had worked hard. I could afford it. So, I asked the sales assistant to help me process the purchase and took the television to the checkout counter.

The young lady behind the counter greeted me politely and began scanning the item. As she reached across the counter, I noticed that one of her hands was badly deformed. It looked twisted and stiff, almost lifeless. Instinctively, my attention shifted from the television to her hand. My curiosity piqued.

I greeted her and then gently asked, "What happened to your hand?"

At first, she looked slightly embarrassed, almost as though she was used to people staring but not asking. Then in soft tones, she explained that she had broken it years earlier. Her family could not afford proper medical treatment, so they took her to some traditional bone setters from the Ijaw area. Unfortunately, the treatment went wrong, and the hand healed in a terrible position.

As she spoke, I looked properly at her for the first time. She was very young, perhaps nineteen or twenty at most. There was a sadness in her eyes, but also the kind of acceptance that comes when someone has lived with disappointment and sees no way out of it.

I asked her, "Why didn't you go to a proper hospital afterwards?"

She smiled faintly and said, "My parents could not afford it, sir. So we just left it like this."

Something inside me shifted at that moment. Here I was, about to spend a huge amount of money on a luxury television set, while this young girl standing before me would go through life struggling with one damaged hand simply because her family could not afford medical care.

Suddenly, the television no longer mattered.

I remember standing there, looking at the box, and feeling uncomfortable. I needed to do something about her condition. My conscience would not let me continue. I simply said to her, "No, I'm not buying this television again."

She looked startled. "Why not, sir?"

I honestly did not know how to explain it. I just knew I could not walk away.

So, I gave her my card and asked her to come and see me at my office. My immediate thought was to send her to Dapo, my younger brother, the medical doctor who was running St. Nicholas Hospital at the time, to see whether anything could still be done.

A day or two later, she came to see me. I sent her straight to my brother. After examining her, he called me and said, "Brother Femi, this is very complicated. There is not much we can do for her here in Nigeria. She may need specialist treatment abroad, perhaps in England or South Africa."

The moment he mentioned South Africa, it clicked in my mind. Perhaps, it was the work of providence, but I had just opened an office there and had built a number of relationships through work, including contacts at the South African High Commission.

I asked the girl about her family situation. She told me her parents were separated and that she lived with her mother. I could already imagine the burden her mother must have carried over the years, watching her daughter struggle daily and knowing there was little she could do.

I asked her to return with her mother.

When they came back, I explained everything carefully. Her mother listened in silence at first, almost cautiously, as though she could not believe what she was hearing. Then I saw her eyes begin to fill with hope, as our conversation progressed. I told her I wanted to take her daughter to South Africa for medical attention, to see whether something could still be done for the hand. She agreed immediately.

Of course, I also spoke to my wife. One had to be careful. You cannot simply travel abroad with a young girl without proper understanding and transparency. But my wife knew me well. After listening to the story, she simply said, "That sounds exactly like something you would do. If you can help her, then do so."

So, the three of us, the young girl, whose name was Adenike, her mother, and I travelled to South Africa.

Through some contacts, I arranged for her to see an orthopaedic surgeon. I still remember the doctor vaguely. I think he may have been Indian – he certainly wasn't black. After examining her hand carefully, he shook his head gently and said, "There is very little we can do to restore the hand itself. The damage is severe."

My heart sank for her.

Then he added, "However, if you can afford it, we can fit her with an electronic prosthetic hand."

He explained that it would function like an artificial glove placed over the damaged hand. It would contain small motors and batteries, allowing her to control movement through the little motion she still had left in her arm.

“At least,” he said, “she may be able to hold a glass of water, use cutlery, and perform simple tasks again.”

I asked him how much it would cost. He told me.

It was a considerable amount of money.

For a brief moment, I paused. But by then, there was no turning back emotionally. I had already come too far to abandon her halfway.

So, I said, “Please go ahead.”

I returned to Nigeria afterwards, while Adenike and her mother remained in South Africa for the procedure. I arranged accommodation for them and made sure they were properly settled.

Eventually, the prosthetic hand was fitted successfully. Unfortunately, they could not match her exact skin tone, so the artificial hand looked noticeably different from the rest of her body. But that did not matter much anymore.

For the first time in years, she could hold a cup properly. She could use a spoon. She could do small things many people take for granted.

When I saw her afterwards, she was ecstatic. She was transformed. Smiling, she said to me, “Oh Daddy, thank you very much. This is wonderful.”

By then, she had started calling me Daddy naturally, and I must admit, hearing it touched me. Eventually, we all returned to Nigeria, and life moved on. I felt satisfied that I had done what I could. Nothing more.

Then, months later, I received an excited phone call.

“Hello Daddy!”

I recognised her voice immediately.

“Daddy, it’s me, Adenike,” she said breathlessly, “someone wants to marry me.”

I was shocked. My first reaction was a protective impulse. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“He proposed to me,” she said happily. “We are getting married.”

I paused for a moment. Before the surgery, I suspect many people would have overlooked her completely. Society can sometimes be very cruel to people living with visible disabilities. Naturally, I was cautious. So, I said to her, “I want to see who this man is.”

I told my wife, “I want to see this young man for myself. I hope nobody is trying to take advantage of her.” My wife and I attended the wedding.

The young man looked sincere, calm, and decent. He was only slightly older than she was. Today, I believe they have three or four children together.

As I watched them that day, I felt an indescribable sense of reward. I was grateful I had listened to my conscience in a shopping mall instead of walking away.

Sometimes, people think that helping others is a sign of weakness. Some wonder why I am concerned with these things. But life has taught me that many of the ordinary things we take for granted are luxuries completely beyond the reach of others.

If it is within your power to help, do so. In the end, kindness has a way of returning to us. Sometimes through peace of mind. Sometimes through unexpected blessings. And sometimes through the simple privilege of knowing that you changed the course of another person’s life.



Adenike and Oluwfemi Faleye, her son.

## Recreation

For fun, I enjoy swimming and playing tennis to stay in shape. I belong to several clubs in Lagos, like the Metropolitan Club, where you have to be male and over forty to join. On my fortieth birthday, my father handed me the forms to join since he was the club's third president, "Fill them in and hand them back to me," he ordered. So, I did.

Then, there is the Yoruba Tennis Club. The name is a misnomer because there are other tribes other than Yoruba, and we don't even play tennis there. Then, there's the Lagos Tennis Club, the Yacht Club, the Ikoyi Club, the Lagos Motorboat Club, and others. I don't go to all of them, but I make sure to pay my membership fees each year.

I love soccer, cricket, and tennis, but I don't like American sports. They are too lazy. Give me a good game of rugby over a padded, helmet-wearing team, playing American football. Chelsea used to be my favourite football club, only because I lived in Knightsbridge at some point in my life, so I support them to show solidarity due to the accident of proximity.

Then, my friend's wife is an Arsenal supporter, so now I support them by association because she is Arsenal-mad. When Arsenal plays she wears a shirt.

I also follow major Nigerian matches at the level of the African Cup of Nations, the Olympics, and the World Cup. In Nigeria, football is such a unifier. We may discriminate and malign one another based on our ethnic sentiment, but when it comes to football, we are Nigerian.

Besides these little joys, I enjoy music. I have a good friend, Femi Adeniyi Williams who shares the same passion. Our fathers were good friends as well - they were both transferred as regional engineer and regional medical officer in Osogbo in 1947, and that's when our friendship started. He is six months older than me. He introduced me to the Harvest Singers. We meet every month to sing Church hymns, after which we have a brunch or buffet. I was also a member of the choir at the Cathedral Church of Christ in Lagos, but I no longer sing with them.



My best friend since childhood, Femi Adeniyi Williams, and his wife, Temitope.

For food, I enjoy all sorts of meals, but I particularly love fish. I have a thing for pounded yam, and one of my favorite meals is rice with draw soup, especially fisherman okra, which is kind of unusual. I don't meet many people who share that preference.

In conclusion, I read something a while ago that after two or three generations, the last person who remembers you will be dead. Whether you are modest or not, is immaterial because all humanity will phase out. Whatever generation you live in is just an era.

My burial place is set. It is next to my wife's. For what it's worth, even burial sites are soon forgotten by family members. However, for the sake of my children and grandchildren, I desire to stay alive for as long as possible. There are still things to do and places to see.



When I clocked 85



With Kabiyesi Alake Egba, during a visit to his palace in Abeokuta, Ogun State.



Myself and my cousin, Dr. Akin Majekodunmi, a medical doctor and trusted advisor on the larger Majekodunmi family matters.



The legendary Olumo Rock in Abeokuta is captured in the background on my visit to the historic site.

## AFTERWORD

I hope that you, my children, will remember me as the father who did the best he could with the cards he was dealt. In my twilight years, my time will be spent at leisure, enjoying my grandchildren and seeing the world.

I desire that you take the good you saw in your mothers and me, and build on them in your lives. Hopefully, we have lived by example. We weren't perfect, but we did our best.

I wish you peace, joy, happiness, and a good life.

Adieu, until I have the opportunity to write to you again.

Your father,

Olufemi Majekodunmi.

## INVICTUS

By William Henley

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

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