



Glorious Exit of a Once in a Generation Physiotherapy Icon, Educator, Mentor, Leader, Administrator, and Pioneer: Prof. Isaac Olaleye Owoeye (1948-2025)

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Celebrating the Life of Isaac Olaleye Owoeye, PT, MS, PhD, FNSP, FNSSM



Sometime in 1991, during an Electrophysics lecture, some agitated and disturbed 200 Level, BSc physiotherapy students at the College of Medicine, University of Lagos (CMUL), took up their lecturer on an issue bothering their young minds. They were apprehensive of the reported poor earning power and potentially bleak future prospects, professionally upon graduation. The following dialogue therefore ensued:

Lecturer: *“Never mind the present condition of service of physiotherapists in Nigeria; it is a camouflage. Outside Nigeria, physiotherapists are well paid, highly priced, valued and respected. That is why many Nigerian physiotherapists including many of my colleagues here are going abroad, especially to the USA for greener pastures”.*

The students became excited, but they wondered and prodded further:

Students: *“If that is true sir, then why are you still here, why haven't you gone too?”*

Lecturer: *“Well, I also got many tempting offers, none of which I applied for. My colleagues abroad gave my name and credentials to some Physical Therapy Schools in the USA who decided to offer me appointments even without applications or interviews. All these offers came at a crucial time that if I leave, the BSc program here will collapse. But I believe that you students have a right to your BSc education just as I had mine. You are the reason why I have stayed back. My joy therefore will be if each one of you graduate with flying colours. Then I would be fulfilled and fully compensated”.*

With these heart touching words, this crop of 26 young students became highly motivated in their studies. They broke all available academic and extracurricular records at the CMUL at the time. Their 1994 graduating set had distinctions in all courses. They produced two, 1st Class degrees, fifteen (15) 2nd Class Upper Division and nine (9) 2nd Class Lower Division degrees. Their records till date at the CMUL some 31 years after are yet to be equaled. In 2025, their class boast of 6 Professors, 3 Deans of Schools or Colleges of Health Professions, a Deputy Provost of the CMUL, and fantastic clinicians and leaders spread around the world, making impact.

Those were the days of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the Ibrahim Babangida Administration; there was economic crunch. Professionals could hardly sustain themselves on their salaries. Those were the days of the 'Andrews'. Remember Andrew?... *“I'm checking out! No light, no water, no good roads, you can't even make a phone call, Bullshit! I'm checking out!”* Remember that NTA jingles on national TV stations nationwide? Things were really BAD. It was about the same time that the US congress passed a bill which allowed America to recruit internationally educated Physiotherapists (PTs) enmass, to supplement and meet up with demands for rehabilitation services in the US. Many other wealthy countries also were actively recruiting Nigerian physiotherapists. In the US, the H1-B visa at the time was therefore almost 'automatic' for Nigerian PTs, many of whom were relocating to the USA daily in their numbers; a few migrated to the UK, some to Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries, and yet a handful to Canada. It was Nigeria Physiotherapy 'Export' galore.

The effects of the mass exodus of Nigerian physiotherapists were outstanding! There was a dearth of seasoned and skilled clinicians in our Health Centers nationwide. Distinguished Physiotherapists who were providing leadership for the profession about that time became absent thereby putting on hold momentarily, the cause of the profession's progress being pursued at that time. There was a progressive and exponential depletion of the faculty (i.e., lecturers and

professorial) pool of our academic institutions. The very existence of Nigeria's Physiotherapy education and training programs was threatened.

Professor Isaac Owoeye, to the financial disadvantage of himself and his immediate family, stayed back, and held the fort. In the face of downturn in Government funding and lack of personal and professional incentives... he stayed put. He deserves our commendations and acknowledgements. He deserves to be celebrated, and worthy of national award by the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Nigeria Society of Physiotherapy. Indeed, successive generations of physiotherapists and those coming behind will not forget this Icon. He was a patriot, and a great citizen of this country.

Today, I join many colleagues from around the world, including former students, and mentees of our icon, mentor, teacher, professor, inspiration, a once in a generation leader, in celebrating the life of Isaac Olaleye Owoeye, BSc, MSc, PhD, MNSP, FNASM, Professor of Physiotherapy, CMUL. Consultant Physiotherapist, LUTH, Pioneer Registrar, Medical Rehabilitation Therapists (Registration) Board of Nigeria (MRTB), and Past President of Nigeria Society of Physiotherapy (NSP).

Professor Owoeye joined CMUL in 1979 as the only MSc in Physiotherapy degree (Long Island University) holder at a time when the school needed at least one master's degree holder on staff in order to graduate their first set of BSc Physiotherapy students in 1980. The University of Lagos thereafter sent him and ten (10) others as University Scholars abroad for doctoral studies. This was in order for them to return home to Nigeria after their studies and help strengthen the BSc program. Unfortunately, of the eleven (11) physiotherapists sent abroad for further studies by the University of Lagos, it was only Prof. Owoeye who returned back to Nigeria after completing his PhD studies (New York University). He honoured the bond he signed with the University. He was a man of integrity, and character. The 4-year BSc program which has now become a 6-year Doctor of Physiotherapy program would have collapsed at the time, if not for the sacrifice of Prof. Owoeye who returned to Nigeria, and stayed back to ensure continuity of the program. Professor Owoeye is the Lecturer discussed in the short true-life story narrated above. I was fortunate to be one of those 26 young minds he impacted that day during Electrophysics lecture. He shunned all offers from the USA and stayed back to keep the CMUL physiotherapy program running.

Prof. Owoeye had a diehard patriotic zeal. Indeed, he had a call to stay back while others left. He sacrificed the comfort and the juicy opportunities that awaited him and his family, if he had gone abroad. Professor Isaac Olaleye Owoeye, therefore, belongs in our glorious memories, and deserves our tributes, and respect, as he transitioned to rest in the bosom of his Creator. We celebrate today the life of this great Icon, who has gone home to rest. Without his sacrifices and those of his immediate family, many of us today, me included, who are making great impact around the world, would not have actualized our dreams and prophetic destinies. Our vast potential would have been cut short, or severely caged-in, while many may not have achieved their God-given destinies. It was indeed a great sacrifice on the part Professor Owoeye (and his family) who stayed back at home and made a pathway for many of us. In fact, it takes a calling to make such sacrifices. I therefore join my colleagues from around the world to pay tribute to my personal mentor, my teacher, my professor, and my role model. He was our inspiration in our student days. Wow, our Baba is gone! He came, he saw, and he conquered. He was my personal Baba, and my peers used to call me, 'Omo Baba' (i.e., Baba's son), in those days, because even on campus, I modeled my outlook after him, walked like him, dressed like him, attempted to talk like him, and definitely, I adopted his writing style. He greatly inspired me, personally. Adieu Professor of Professors, Teacher of teachers. Indeed, a once in a generation leader, teacher and mentor, and an 'Apostle' of Physiotherapy in Nigeria has gone home to rest. *'Welcome home, good and faithful servant'*, is what I imagine he will hear from our Heavenly Father, as he crosses, and enters through the Pearly gates. Till we meet again on resurrection morning, I say on behalf of many, thank you, Baba, thank you, Professor Isaac Olaleye Owoeye, *the son of Father Abraham*, as he fondly refers to himself, because of his first name, Isaac.

Let me end my tribute by saying to our Mama, Mrs. Theresa Ibidun Owoeye, and Baba's children and immediate family: Thank you for your sacrificial giving to us all. As Prof. Owoeye carried on his earthly assignment, and 'ministry', he was missed by you all at home. As he was busy shaping the lives and destiny of many, you sacrificed as we disproportionately shared him with you. Please be comforted in the words of scripture from 2 Corinthians 6:10; *"...As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."* You may appear 'poor', but you all have made us 'rich' through Baba's sacrificial life. You may appear to have 'nothing', but you have everything through Baba's life. The man you knew as Husband, Father, Grandfather, etc, is, and was an "Apostle of Physiotherapy", sent by God to shape the professional destinies of many, and to raise the foundations of many generations (Isaiah 58:12). Part of his calling while on earth was to use the vehicle physiotherapy education to lift many out of poverty, open the doors of the nations of the world to many families and servants of God. God used Baba to lead many into their destinies, as many of his former students used their professional calling of physiotherapy as the steppingstone into their respective prophetic destinies across the nations of the world. While on earth, Prof. Owoeye worked with the passion and urgency of this God-given assignment, in fact, he appeared 'consumed with the zeal' of this assignment. This was partly because his divine assignment was made more challenging as it seems many other people called alongside of him left Nigeria prematurely for greener pastures. He alone therefore had to bear and shoulder the responsibility and the burden meant to be shared by

many. At a time, he was simultaneously holding the offices of President of the NSP, Registrar of the MRTB (i.e., accreditation and regulation of Physiotherapy education and practice in Nigeria), President of the Nigerian Union of Pharmacists, Medical Laboratory Scientists and Professions Allied to Medicine, and also led accreditation visits to all physiotherapy academic programs, hospitals/medical centers across Nigeria; while mostly driving himself and his team in his green Peugeot 504, saloon vehicle. No wonder, you missed him so much at home. Therefore, each one of you, his immediate family members will also share in his eternal rewards, because of your sacrifice through his absence, while he was on assignment. May the Lord cause His Face to shine upon you, comfort you, and give you His peace, in Jesus' mighty name, Amen!

Lastly, many may be wondering why Professor Isaac Owoeye was so passionate and consumed with the zeal of his earthly assignment, and the reason I also refer to him as an 'Apostle of Physiotherapy' in Nigeria. Here is a clue: Baba once shared with me his encounter with the Lord (this is my own characterization of his story) on this assignment. There was a particular season in his life that things were very tough financially, and he prayed to God for assistance, and a way out. About that moment came a letter from a University in the US, appointing him as Full Professor, and Chair of their Department of Physical Therapy. Baba said he was so elated, excited, and momentarily saw himself and his family returning to the US, an easy way out to put an end to the economic challenges of the time, to also give his family a better life. He said this was the most tempting of all similarly unsolicited offers from the US. In the heat of the moment, as he assumed this was an answer to his prayers, until he went to his office, sat down behind his desk, probably to start working on the next steps to accept the offer; then a 'presence' (again, this is my characterization) came strongly into the room, and over him, spoke strongly into his thoughts and showed him how 'self-serving' his thoughts and new plans to relocate to the US were. It was pointed out to him that he was not seeing the lives and destinies of generation of students that has been committed to his hands in Nigeria, and that he will be abandoning them all if he relocates. He was assured his needs would be met if he stayed. Baba said it was at that junction that he became strongly persuaded and that this is his divine assignment in life. Baba said, being persuaded, he therefore tore the letter of offer from the US into pieces, in such a way that it was unrecoverable, and made sure it went into the trash. He said he decided never to mention this offer letter to Mama Owoeye, because lately, they have been having 'arguments' about going back to the US like others. After he purposed in his heart to stay back, he said he heard a knock on his door, lo and behold one of his former students from the US was visiting, and brought glad tidings of how many of his former students are doing well abroad, and how he had to make it a duty to come and see and say hello to Baba. On his way out of the door, the former student handed Baba an envelope, which contains a lot of US dollars contributed by his students. They have heard about the economy troubles in Nigeria, and were concerned for Baba, and hence when one of them was visiting, they all decided to contribute. Prof. Owoeye mentioned to me that this monetary gift from his students met all his financial needs at the time, and much left over. These divine coincidences further encouraged and cemented Prof. Owoeye's resolve to stay back, and hold the fort, thereby saving the physiotherapy education program at the CMUL. Mama Theresa Owoeye, and Baba's family, in case you are hearing this story for the first time, let this comfort you that like Apostle Paul in scripture, Professor Isaac Olaley Owoeye finished his course, he kept the faith, and completed the race set before him is a faithful servant.

Adieu, my personal Baba!

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