

A TRIBUTE TO GOOD AFRICAN MODESTY: ON BERNARD ONYANGO, THE FATHER¹

There is an old Nigerian saying: if you have the blessings of many fathers, you are destined to a fate of many deaths. Bernard Onyango was the first born of nine brothers and one sister. We grew up treating all of the siblings as our fathers (and some of the younger ones as brothers). Over the last several years each one of them has been passing along like ships in the night—some of them abruptly and quickly (like Uncle Nathan Odoi); others (such as Uncle Akisoferi Ogola and our father) in a long-drawn out dance with death. For each of those deaths, we have mourned and cried and wailed and lamented, most recently in April this year when we laid to rest our dear Uncle Amos Ochieng. From the original football team of eleven, we are now left with only three.

But we've also celebrated. We've celebrated the great wealth that our many fathers and our one ssenga, Erina Awori (who we call 'waya' in Dhopadhola) left behind. Indeed our family cannot complain about riches. Our fathers and their only sister were very wealthy. Not in material things, but in those things on which you cannot place a value: they were wealthy in honour and in integrity. They were wealthy in humour and in passion. They were rich in love and affection; our fathers and their sister loved us (their collective family) without reservation; they loved their home—wherever that happened to be—and they loved their respective religions, even though they prayed in different churches.

It is for this reason that I am extremely honoured to have been asked to say something today on behalf of Bernard Onyango's family. Our immediate family is now nearly a clan. It is made up of my mother (Lucy Kahambo Onyango, whom we call 'LKO' or the 'Grandmaster'), my 4 siblings (Christine, Simon, Patricia and Bernard Jr.) and our four

¹ A eulogy delivered on Thursday, October 17, 2013 at St. Augustine's Chapel, Makerere University.

‘spices’ (Charles Onyango-Obbo, Sylvia Tamale, Nancy Asiko and Eunice Katakanya Karugonjo, a.k.a ‘Katax’) and BO’s nine grandchildren (Charlene, Lucy Jr., Sharon, Trevor, Jason, Simon Jr., Kwame, Samora and the latest addition, Malachai Patrice Kisangala Apuuli-wod-Okecho, a.k.a Bernard Onyango III). Together we are part of the *Kijwala* clan that comes from the village of Kiyeyi in Tororo District. And while we’ve heard a lot about the official side of our father, today I want to speak about his other values and influences, and in particular about what he meant to us as our oldest father.

Our father’s influences were very many—his religion, his nationality (as a Jopadhola, as a Ugandan, as a pan-African and as a citizen of the World) his partner (LKO), but most importantly his family. His father—Andereya Pino Ochwo—was a teacher and a preacher who built many schools and churches in Padhola. But I believe it was his mother (our grandmother—Lakeri Ajwang) who may have been the most important influence of all, and she certainly turned him in the direction that led him to become what he is today. Lakeri was a small, but very powerful and no-nonsense woman. The story is told that she gave the young Bernard Shs.3/= for his school fees back in the 1940s. At the time, our father was an aspiring musician who played both the guitar and the mouth-organ. Indeed, when we were young we remember him singing great versions of the hit songs of the 1960s like “*Olupapula si mupiira*,” “*Gaali ya Mukka*,” and, his favourite, “*Wambuza oba ng’akwagala*.” The young Onyango was the lead guitarist in a local band, and used his school fees to buy a guitar. When Lakeri discovered this, she was of course furious. The story goes that she broke the guitar and returned it to the person who had sold it, demanding a refund. She then took the refunded fees to school and personally paid it over to the School Bursar. But for Lakeri’s intervention, Bernard Onyango would have been a musician!

Instead, he chose to become a teacher, and in doing so he left us his most precious of legacies: he left us a reputation, he left us his values and most importantly he left us his name. However, living under the

‘shadow’ of his name was not necessarily always a good thing: “Are you the Bernard Onyango’s son/daughter?” was a question we were often asked, and continue to be asked even as far afield as Madison in the USA and Cape Town in South Africa.

The Onyango name was a bit of a paradox: If you were doing good things, it was a welcome question, because the person asking will have either (successfully) danced to “Onyango’s disco” at Makerere or met him in one capacity or another. On the other hand, if you gave a particularly good speech (and somebody whispered that you were Onyango’s son or daughter), people would say “No wonder,” as if you never put your own effort into the event. And if you were up to mischief (as I often was) it was not a very welcome question, (especially if it was your school teacher asking) because you knew that the bad things you were doing would eventually find their way back to our father! The Onyango name was also claimed by many across East Africa, with people wondering whether he was a Kenyan on sabbatical in Uganda.

Our father loved good company and he loved a good, cold beer, always taking the opportunity to combine both. He used to say it was a sin to drink a beer “by yourself.” On a good day after work, one could find him (with his great friends like Michael Wandera, Erisa Kironde, Prof. John Mugerwa or Ssalongo Senteza Kajubi) sitting in one of the *bufunda* on Biashara Street sharing a good laugh and telling mischievous stories. But he was not averse to a good strong cup of English tea, which he shared with his teetotal friends like our ‘Uncle’ George (Kihuguru) and his best friend, Thomas Kaleebi ‘TK’ (Mugoya).

Our father had many nicknames. Back in the day when he was Registrar at Makerere his nickname was the ‘Disc-jockey’ or ‘Mr. DJ.’ In the village he was fondly called ‘jafuonji,’ or ‘the teacher,’ even though he last taught in a school 50+ years ago. But the nickname he liked most was ‘BO.’ I asked him why, and he told me: ‘it has taken me 78 years to become famous; and now I finally am thanks to the fact that I share the

same initials with the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama!’

That remark showed BO’s most endearing quality: his modesty. For many years BO had no car, and he would walk wherever he wanted to go—briskly! When setting up Nkozi, BO would catch a taxi at the main park, ride down to Kayabwe and walk the four miles from Masaka Road to the university. He used to call himself the ‘Walking Registry.’ BO would think nothing of catching a boda-boda bicycle to travel the 20 miles from Tororo to Kiyeyi to see his beloved mother, helping to push the bicycle through muddy puddles. And I can assure you that was no easy feat. For those of you who will travel to Kiyeyi on Saturday, you will find out why upon arrival for a first visit to the place, one of our spouses—who shall remain nameless—exclaimed, “*Banange! Tutuse ku nkomerelo ye ensi,*” (“We’ve reached the end of the world!”)

But we would be remiss not to point out that besides every great man, there is always a woman, and the great woman besides BO was our mother, LKO. In my humble opinion, BO’s most inspired decision was to marry our mother, who comes from the Amor Kasede clan. LKO was a great source of stability and focus for our family for the fifty-six years they were married, and was there for our father through thick and thin; rough and smooth. They complemented each other well—the idealist broad thinker and the hands-on pragmatic organizer with the iron hand. We believe that it was through having a partner like LKO that BO was able to realize all the achievements we are celebrating today. Indeed, one of the greatest lessons we have learnt as children is to marry wisely! We thus thank our mother and all of her clans-people from Morikiswa and Budaka, who our father loved dearly.

Finally, for the last 10 years of his life, BO was the patient of so many doctors he used to joke that he had earned a Medical degree by osmosis! We thank them deeply and also salute Hospice Uganda for trying their level best to make his last months on earth just a little bit more comfortable.

And so while we should praise Bernard Onyango for his principled stand on politics; for his non-compromising views on corruption and for what he did for his religion, as well as for his great contribution to the advancement of higher education, for us in his family we end by saluting our father for his undying zeal and his all-consuming energy; for his love of life and his under-stated sense of humour; for being a 'Big Man' of simple tastes and great modesty. We salute him for being the father we will always miss. And we thank you all for so loving our father, and by extension for so loving us.

We're sure that wherever he is, BO is keeping everybody entertained:
Fare thee well Mr. DJ: Keep on playing your song!

By his son, Joseph Andrew Oloka-Onyango