

Carrying My Father's Torch

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS AFRICAN WORLD SERIES
Toyin Falola, Series Editor

*Africa, Empire and Globalization:
Essays in Honor of A. G. Hopkins*

Toyin Falola, editor, and Emily Brownell, editor

African Entrepreneurship in Jos, Central Nigeria, 1902–1985
S.U. Fwatshak

*An African Music and Dance Curriculum Model:
Performing Arts in Education*
Modesto Amegago

*Authority Stealing:
Anti-Corruption War and Democratic Politics
in Post-Military Nigeria*
Wale Adebani

*The Bukusu of Kenya:
Folktales, Culture and Social Identities*
Namulundah Florence

Carrying My Father's Torch: A Memoir
Kalu Ogbaa

Contemporary African Literature: New Approaches
Tanure Ojaide

*Contesting Islam in Africa:
Homegrown Wahhabism and Muslim Identity in Northern Ghana, 1920–2010*
Abdulai Iddrisu

*Converging Identities:
Blackness in the Modern African Diaspora*
Julius Adegunle and Hettie V. Williams

*Democracy in Africa:
Political Changes and Challenges*
Saliba Sarsar, editor, and Julius O. Adegunle, editor

*Diaspora and Imagined Nationality:
USA-Africa Dialogue and Cyberframing Nigerian Nationhood*
Koleade Odotola

*Food Crop Production, Hunger, and Rural Poverty in
Nigeria's Benue Area, 1920–1995*
Mike Odugbo Odey

*Esu:
Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*
Toyin Falola

*Ghana During the First World War:
The Colonial Administration of Sir Hugh Clifford*
Elizabeth Wrangham

Globalization: The Politics of Global Economic Relations and International Business
N. Oluwafemi Mimiko

*A History of Class Formation in the Plateau Province of Nigeria, 1902–1960:
The Genesis of a Ruling Class*
Monday Yakiban Mangywat

*Horror in Paradise:
Frameworks for Understanding the Crises of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria*
Christopher LaMonica and J. Shola Omotola

Imperialism, Economic Development and Social Change in West Africa
Raymond Dumett

In Search of African Diasporas: Testimonies and Encounters
Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

*Intercourse and Crosscurrents in the Atlantic World:
Calabar-British Experience, 17th–20th Centuries*
David Lishilinimle Imbua

*Julius Nyerere, Africa's Titan on a Global Stage:
Perspectives from Arusha to Obama*
Ali A. Mazrui and Linda L. Mhando

*Local Government in South Africa Since 1994:
Leadership, Democracy, Development, and Service Delivery in a Post-Apartheid Era*
Alexius Amtaika

*Narratives of Struggle:
The Philosophy and Politics of Development in Africa*
John Ayotunde Bewaji

Perspectives on Feminism in Africa

ʼLai Olurode, editor

Pioneer, Patriot, and Nigerian Nationalist:

A Biography of the Reverend M. D. Opara, 1915–1965

Felix Ekechi

Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture

Yomi Ola

The Tiv and Their Southern Neighbours, 1890–1990

Emmanuel Chiahemba Ayangaôr

The Vile Trade:

Slavery and the Slave Trade in Africa

Abi Alabo Derefaka, Wole Ogundele, Akin Alao, and Agustus Ajibola

The Women's War of 1929:

A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria

Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock

The Yoruba Frontier:

A Regional History of Community Formation,

Experience, and Changes in West Africa

Aribidesi Usman

Women, Gender, and Sexualities in Africa

Toyin Falola and Nana Akua Amponsah, editors

Carrying My Father's Torch

A Memoir

Kalu Ogbaa



CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

Durham, North Carolina

Copyright © 2014
Kalu Ogbaa
All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ogbaa, Kalu.

Carrying my father's torch : a memoir / Kalu Ogbaa.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61163-494-5 (alkaline paper)

1. Ogbaa, Kalu. 2. Ogbaa, Kalu--Family. 3. Nigerian Americans--Biography. 4. Immigrants--United States--Biography. 5. College teachers--Connecticut--New Haven--Biography. 6. Igbo (African people)--Biography. 7. Fathers and sons--Nigeria. 8. Nigeria--History--1960---Biography. 9. Nigeria--History--Civil War, 1967-1970 10. Christian biography--Nigeria. I. Title.

E184.N55O35 2013

270.092--dc23

[B]

2013029996

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS
700 Kent Street
Durham, North Carolina 27701
Telephone (919) 489-7486
Fax (919) 493-5668
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

To
My father, Mazi Stephen Ogbaa Ikpo
And
My mother, Mrs. Ogonnaya Ogbaa Ikpo
For giving me life and the torch

Contents

Series Editor's Preface	xiii
Introduction	xv
Part One · <i>A Father's Influence</i>	
Chapter 1 · Why We Wrestle	3
Chapter 2 · My Ancestors	15
Chapter 3 · My Birth and Early Incidents in My Life	19
Chapter 4 · Becoming a Christian	31
Part Two · <i>The Educational Matches</i>	
Chapter 5 · The Primary School Years	41
Chapter 6 · Beyond the Village	65
Chapter 7 · War Days in Biafra	79
Chapter 8 · Postwar Reconstruction	97
Chapter 9 · Starting a Career and a Family	121
Part Three · <i>My American Experience</i>	
Chapter 10 · Coming to America for Graduate Studies	151
Chapter 11 · Back Home with the Golden Fleece	173
Part Four · <i>My Second Coming to America</i>	
Chapter 12 · The Sabbatical Leave Years	221
Chapter 13 · From Permanent Residency to Citizenship	239
Chapter 14 · A Second Chance on Marriage	257
Chapter 15 · Southern Life	267
Conclusion	279
Acknowledgments	283
Index	285

Series Editor's Preface

The Carolina Academic Press *African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve as both reference works and readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series is intended to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola
University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

This book tells the story of my struggles—with my homeland and its colonial past, with ethnic differences and violence that produced the Nigeria-Biafra War, but most of all with my father, a man who himself lived through and was shaped by these struggles. At this stage of my life, I can say that I am my father's son, and that I have taken up his torch to new places. I now live in America, where I have tried to realize his dream of using Western education and values to overcome the poverty and turmoil of life in postcolonial Nigeria. I am also Igbo, and that ethnic identity, passed on from father to son, has had an enormous influence on me, from customs, dispositions, and values that still affect who I am, to a stake and role in the bloody Nigerian civil war. Finally, like my father, I am Christian, which has helped me get a universal perspective on my country's and my own personal history.

Christianity has been a source of solace and reconciliation, which has helped me to come to terms with the difficulties of my homeland and my struggles with my father, who was both an exacting taskmaster and beloved ideal. This memoir tells the story of how I, a young Igbo boy, took on the ideals of my father and found my way from a situation of poverty, postcolonial malaise, and ethnic violence to a new life as a university professor in America. It is a story that tells how the burden of carrying my father's torch has given me the freedom of a new life, one that remains haunted by the traumas of its past, but which embraces the blessings of its present and future.

My father himself wrestled with the idea of adapting to the socio-cultural, political, and religious changes that occurred in Igbo society because of the British invasion of their land between 1902 and 1906. After some futile resistance to the changes, he became one of the first to join the church white missionaries founded in our clan. He first became a Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) convert, and later a convert of the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM). He studied up to Standard II, which enabled him to serve as an interpreter in his village

church for the white missionaries. He played music for the church band and led other native Christians when they went on open-air and camp crusades. My father loved schooling, and he would have gone beyond the level of education he attained if there had not been a devastating incident that prevented him from achieving his educational goal.

According to him, Scottish missionaries and British officials invited him to train as a police constable, so he could help maintain law and order in his clan and to run some errands for them. He had received enough basic literacy training in English to train for those roles. He could read and write letters for his fellow villagers (and later in my lifetime, he could write agreements for them). As he prepared to go for the training, his elder sister refused to let him go, threatening to die if my father left their home for anywhere else. In obedience to his sister's wishes, Father declined the invitation, and the ruling white men gave the opportunity to another villager. However, six months later, the sister died, and Father lost the opportunity to become a leader in a white man's employment but not the will to become a village leader in other village affairs.

He perfected his wrestling match prowess and strategies and became a wrestling champion in his village and clan. In addition, he became a parent-teacher association (PTA) chairperson and secretary, respectively, alternating the two roles with another literate man from a neighboring village, when the Scottish missionaries established a primary school between our village of Umuchiakuma and the neighboring Amammiri village. Other roles he played in the village and clan because of his basic formal school education in his time taught him the importance of acquiring a Western education. So he vowed to train all his children, especially the boys, in school. When other parents failed to encourage their children to attend school, he insisted that his own children had to go, with or without his material support. He would punish me if I failed to do my homework or come out on top of my classes in every test and exam I took. I did not understand why he was doing that to me at my young age. But after I became a college graduate, he told me the reason he had dropped out of school and never became the police constable for which he wanted to train. He thus failed to realize his dream. It seemed to me that he was vicariously living through my achievements as an educated person.

Now that I live permanently in America and have grown older and perhaps wiser with sons and grandsons both in the United States and Nigeria and my father is no longer alive, I feel the urge to write my story,

which includes recalling and examining the events of the uneasy relationship I had with him very early in my life. I fear that some of my sons, who detect some of my father's character traits in me, misunderstand me occasionally as I did my father. Some days, he would show me the greatest love a father could show to his most beloved son, but on other days, he would spank me or talk to me harshly because of some mistakes I made, including those I considered minor. On such days, I wondered if he loved me at all. No, my father could never overlook any of my mistakes and avoid punishing me for them. To my mother, a demure and obedient Christian wife, what my father was doing to me then was a show of tough love to his beloved son. From time to time, she would remind me of what the Holy Bible says:

Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God gives thee (Exodus 20:12).

On his own part, my father would constantly exert his paternal authority over me and recite a similar biblical passage after punishing me, lest I forget to obey or honor him as if he were God:

My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments:
For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee (Proverbs 3: 1-2).

As time went by, I learned to listen carefully to my father and to do whatever he asked me to do without questions. Nevertheless, that is not to say that I appreciated the rocky father-son relationship between us early in my life.

“How could I, the last born of four children, be the one that he always sent to run all his errands? Why couldn't he ask Brother Ikpo to run some of the errands for him as I did?” I asked myself. But I dared not ask such questions openly, fearing he would spank me for my effrontery.

It was after my father realized that I was trying to neither disobey him purposely nor impugn his parental authority that he began to act in a way that surprised me pleasantly. He showed me some measure of kindness that seemingly cleared some of my doubts. One day, he invited me for a private talk in his house where my mother and Brother Ikpo could not hear us.

“Do you know how special you are to me?” he began.

“No, I don’t,” I said, for I did not understand what he was getting at, and my eyes began to cloud up with tears.

“Yes, you are! I see you as a very perceptive, mentally sharp, and physically agile, son. I trust you as the only one who can deliver my messages accurately to people. And, I see you as being capable of carrying my torch when I become unable to do most of the tasks I’m now doing in our home and community.”

I had never before known my father had so much trust and regard for me as his beloved. I was overjoyed and wondered if Father had always been preparing me for a big role all along without showing any hint of his intentions.

“Why do you think I call you *Ikenga nna ya* (Father’s right hand man) whenever you please me or bring honor to our family?” he asked. “Always remember the Bible passage I read in our last family prayer meeting. ‘Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying’ (Proverbs 19:18). I only chasten you to make you stronger—and to keep you from suffering at the whims of fortune which will sometimes bring hard times to you and your life.”

As a result of our discussion, I began to work harder than before to maintain his trust and thereby become my given name, Kalu, which means God of thunder and war, and my praise name, *Ikenga nna ya*, which means his father’s right hand man.

It is for the sake of my children and grandchildren’s understanding of me as a father and grandfather, as well as for the benefit of all struggling young people that I write my story so they can stop doubting their bright future in life. For both reasons, I feel it is important that I tell the story of my life, which begins with my family upbringing, colonial education, and my professional life: my story, which echoes the story of all the poor and needy, who have strived to get out of poverty and become successful in life at the long last. I hope my story—indeed our collective story of struggles and triumphs—will inspire other people who started life poor like me to aim at achieving a better life for themselves in spite of whatever obstacles they face in life.