

## **DR. JUSTIN MICHAEL DIDI UKU THE GREAT FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST**

Dr. Justin Michael Didi Uku was born in Sapele, Delta State of Nigeria on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1921. He was the first of eight sons of late Chief Augustine Uku a retired Assistant surveyor of posts, and former Commissioner for Trade and Industry in the defunct Midwestern Nigeria in 1966. He was later installed as the Olareaja ( First Citizen ) of Okere, Warri South Local Government Area. Dr Uku's mother was the late Mrs. Mabel Thomas Uku, daughter of late James Awadagin Thomas, an industrialist and rubber magnate who established vast acres of rubber plantations in Sapele, Jesse and Warri. He owned a number of boats and between 1910 and 1934 travelled to the United Kingdom many times. He was accompanied on some of these trips by his lawyer the late Asifo Egbe. James Awadagin Thomas set the trend by educating all his children. Indeed his son late Professor Horatio Oritsejomi Thomas became a pioneer medical doctor in Midwestern Nigeria in 1942. He was a plastic surgeon of international repute. He was provost of the School of Medicine, University of Lagos and later served as vice chancellor of University of Ibadan, the premier university of Nigeria. Dr. Uku's paternal grandmother was late Madam Uwa Omoiyobe Okoedion Uku, one of the daughters of Pa Okoedion of Ugbeni Quarters , Ubiaja, who hailed from the royal lineage of the Enogies of Ubiaja in Edo State. She brought up her only son Chief Augustine Uku, one of over thirty children of her husband as a catholic against the tradition at that time. It was no surprise that Chief and Mrs. Uku were married in the catholic church and celebrated the golden jubilee of their wedding in 1971. Dr. Uku was therefore of noble birth.

Dr. Justin Uku had his early education at Sapele and Oshogbo where his father worked as postmaster from 1928. He proceeded to Government College, Ibadan for his secondary education, where he met many students who became his lifelong friends. He completed his studies at Government College with a very outstanding result in his school certificate examination in 1939. He commenced his training to become a medical doctor at Higher College, Yaba, which was the only institution that offered the course in Nigeria at that time. In 1944 he convinced his parents that he would be better qualified if sent abroad. In May that year, at the age of twenty three, he left to continue his medical studies at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. He travelled abroad by sea, a journey which was not without its anxious moments as the second world war was still on. They had to travel in a convoy of many ships protected by some naval ships.

In spite of wartime difficulties, Justin pursued his studies diligently and qualified in 1949. He again made many lasting friendship here. It is noteworthy to mention that he was very happy to attend the golden jubilee anniversary of his qualification from the university, which afforded him the opportunity to meet with his former classmates. He did treasure this event. He worked in Sunderland for about a year before returning to Nigeria to join the Federal civil service as a medical officer. His work took him to various parts of the country including, Lagos, Makurdi, Benin City, Ibadan, Ikeja.

In 1957 he proceeded to United Kingdom to pursue a postgraduate course in forensic pathology at Hammersmith Hospital. This period coincided with the time when I just completed my architectural course at Sheffield University. At this time, I was also

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pursuing a postgraduate course in tropical architecture in London, Justin and I shared a flat in London, which afforded me an opportunity of knowing him well. Our stay was enjoyable and memorable. I was able to meet many of his friends and associates. I also developed with him a bond which I will treasure and cherish eternally.

Dr. Uku qualified and returned to Nigeria in 1958 as the first Nigerian forensic pathologist. He was in charge of the forensic laboratory at Yaba and carried out his work diligently. His evidence in many landmark cases assisted in convicting guilty murderers. He was very hardworking, honest and his integrity was beyond reproach. In appreciation of the good performance of his work he was promoted until he attained the second highest post of Deputy Director of Medical Services in the Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria. In his position as the foremost forensic pathologist, he attended many conferences and courses, mostly in the United States. He retired voluntarily from the service in 1970 when he realised that his aspiration was not in accord with the state of the country.

He left for the US where he worked briefly at New York. He later moved to Buffalo where he progressed steadily and attained the post of County Medical Examiner of the County of Erie, Buffalo. He held this post for many years until he retired in 2002. In keeping with his genial nature he made many friends in his over thirty years sojourn in Buffalo. We, members of his family will carry very fond memories of our visit to him in Buffalo.

On his departure for USA he promised our parents that he would visit them in Nigeria annually. He fulfilled this promise and even surpassed it in some years when he visited twice. During these visits he lectured medical students at Lagos and Ibadan for many years in forensic medicine, acquainting them with the latest developments. He played well his role as the eldest child in the family, and contributed towards the education of his younger brothers.

Members of the family and friends have benefited from Justin's good works and kindness to various persons all over Nigeria. My family was almost losing the tenancy of a flat at Benin City, in 1963, until the landlord realised that I was a brother to Dr. Uku who some years earlier diagnosed that he was diabetic and thus saved his life.

In the nuclear family front, he was a uniting force. His first wife Olive Betson whom he married in Sunderland, pre-deceased him. He loved his children and made great sacrifices to ensure their education. He is survived by his second wife Elaine and seven children, namely, Johnny, David, Peter, Ayo, Babara, Leslie and Melissa.

Justin was a keen cricketer and swimmer in his school days. He loved classical and jazz music both of which have infected me to date. He was humble and always full of humour, and enjoyed his whisky and lately cigars. He will be greatly missed by family members and friends.

**MAY HIS GENTLE SOUL REST IN PERFECT PEACE**

ARC. CHIEF VIVIAN T. UKU.

JULY 19, 2007..