

COMMENTARY

Olikoye Ransome-Kuti: Nigeria's outstanding Minister of Health: A tribute

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Introduction

Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti (ORK) was a man of many parts. He was a graduate of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's premier University, and a pediatrician by training. He was a humane person and was particularly concerned about the needless deaths of babies and children in Nigeria. He trained and served in Lagos early in his career. He introduced the Pakoto Community and Child Health Programme for the training of medical students at the University of Lagos. In 1983 along with two other Nigerians, he founded one of Nigeria's foremost health-focused non-governmental organizations – the Society for Family Health Nigeria (SFH), with the mission to promote best practices in family planning and child health services in the country. In 1985, he joined the government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida as the Minister of Health. In 1986, he announced Nigeria's first AIDS case, in a 14-year-old girl. He was Minister until 1992 when he joined the World Health Organization as its Deputy Director-General.

As Minister, he re-invented primary health care as part of the essential health services scheme in the Nigeria's healthcare system. He frequently lamented the poor state of the healthcare system. His popular refrain was that our teaching hospitals should, at the least, mirror, and function at the level of a General Hospital in the United Kingdom. He popularized the introduction of Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) to rehydrate children suffering from diarrheal diseases and removed cough mixtures from our National Drug Formulary.

I interacted with him closely when I was Assistant Secretary-General and later, as Secretary

General of the Nigeria Medical Association while he served as Minister of Health. A very punctual person, he was often in his office by 7 am. He abhorred lateness to meetings. In 1988, he was the first person to arrive at an empty hall meant for the opening ceremony of the Annual General Conference of the Nigerian Medical Conference at the Federal Palace Hotel, Lagos. He was full of humour. He told us he would wait till 9am scheduled for the commencement of the ceremony and would leave if the meeting did not start at the scheduled time.

He was concerned about the quality of health care services that doctors offered. He complained about the attitude of doctors to work and rejected all requests to recommend doctors for a unique salary scale. He challenged doctors to justify their demand for a special salary scale. However, he agreed after intense pressure to set up the Justice Atanda Fatai Williams Commission to look into doctors' service conditions. Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti was a lover of music, and listened quite a lot to the music of his younger brother, the legendary Fela Anikulapo. He was also someone not given to the allure of office. As Minister, he frequently drove himself in his Volkswagen Golf car to and from his office.

ORK died on the 1st of June, 2003 while on official assignment in London. He was survived by his wife of 50 years, Sonia and three children.

At a lunch in Mexico City on 13 December 2022, Prof Julio Frenk, former Minister of Health, Mexico and President of the University of Miami extolled the outstanding qualities of ORK. He narrated his sterling qualities and described him as the best Director General of World Health Organization that we never had.

Professor Friday Okonofua described ORK as a Nigerian nationalist, social reformer, and international reproductive health advocate¹. He was a man who led by example and who believed in the principle of a leader serving his/her people rather than being served. He was a man of impeccable character and integrity.

Early life

Olikoye Ransome-Kuti was born in Ijebu ode in present-day Ogun State, Southwest Nigeria, on 30 December 1927. He was born into the Jibolu-Taiwo family of Egband, an eminent family of preachers and teachers. His father, the Reverend IO Ransome-Kuti, was a leading school teacher and was the first Chairman of the Nigerian Union of teachers, while his mother, Funmilayo, was a leading women's rights advocate who led many public demonstrations against the unjust treatment of women. She is also remembered to be the first Nigerian woman to drive a car.

Olikoye's sister, Dolu was a nurse, while he was the older brother of two influential Nigerians - Beko, a human rights activist and medical doctor, and Fela, a world-famous musician². He attended the Abeokuta Grammar School in Ogun State, Southwest Nigeria. After his high school education, he proceeded to the University of Ibadan where he was one of the pioneer students of the University before enrolling at Trinity College Dublin, where he studied Medicine between 1948 and 1954³. He then worked as a House Surgeon in the UK, and later as a House Officer at the General Hospital, Lagos, and in various capacities at the University College Hospital, Ibadan. In 1960, he began postgraduate training in pediatrics at the Institute of Child Health, Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, and Hammersmith Hospital in London. He earned the BA, MB, BCh, BAO degrees from the University of Dublin⁴.

After his postgraduate training in the UK, he returned to Ibadan and, in 1970, became Professor and Head of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Lagos. In 1978, he became the first Professor of Primary Care at the University of Lagos. After several years as teacher and mentor, he realized that the solution to the major child health problems he saw daily in the hospital lay in the communities from which the children came. His career, thus, extended beyond the walls of universities into the community. In 1968, he set up

an experimental family health clinic to assess the effectiveness of nurses in the direct delivery of preventive and curative services to mothers and children. This project provided the impetus for the establishment of the Institute of Child Health and Primary Care at the College of Medicine, University of Lagos, and an academic program as part of preservice medical training⁴.

Two incidents demonstrate the resolve and veracity with which Professor Ransome-Kuti conducted his life. As a young House Physician in Lagos in 1955, he visited the morgue of the General Hospital where his father died. There, he encountered the bodies of infants who had died from preventable and treatable diseases such as malaria and meningitis. That very day, he resolved to devote his professional life to pediatrics¹.

The second incident came over 40 years later, when Professor Ransome-Kuti revealed that his brother, legendary Afro beat musician, Fela, died of AIDS-related illnesses. The year was 1997, when many in sub-Saharan Africa - Fela included - continued to deny the very existence of the rapidly-spreading virus. Professor Ransome-Kuti had acknowledged the presence of HIV and AIDS in Nigeria since 1986, but his openness regarding his own brother's death brought many in Nigeria to a wider realization of the true impact of the disease¹.

A national hero

Professor Ransome-Kuti was a Director at the Institute of Child Health of the College of Medicine, University of Lagos. It was in this position that he received the opportunities to put to action his beliefs in disease prevention and community health. His development of successful community-based child health and family planning programs proved to be a turning point in his career. He was appointed the first Director of the Nigerian National Services Scheme Implementation Agency. While in this post, he coordinated the deployment of young Corps Doctors to remote rural areas throughout Nigeria¹.

He became well known, when former military President General Ibrahim Babangida appointed him the country's Health Minister in 1985. The two had met at the Nigeria Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies a few years earlier, before Babangida came into office. The General was at the institute to attend a course when Ransome-Kuti came to deliver a lecture. The lecture had such a gripping effect on Babangida that when he became

Head of State, he offered the Professor the position of Health Minister. Ransome-Kuti did not disappoint and made his mark through the rapid introduction of a comprehensive national health policy. He revolutionized the Nigerian health sector by placing emphasis on preventive medicine, and particularly concentrated on preventable childhood diseases. He encouraged continuous nationwide vaccination programs. Till date, the achievements in the health sector are still regarded as some of the lasting legacies of the Babangida administration, all due to the hard work and efficiency of Professor Ransome-Kuti³.

As Minister, Professor Ransome-Kuti built several primary health care centers across the country and mobilized resources both internally and externally for the development of primary health care in Nigeria. He served longer than any other Minister of Health, and distinguished himself by his humility, transparency, honesty, patriotism, dedication to duty and punctuality¹.

On completion of his tenure as Nigeria's Minister of Health, Professor Ransome-Kuti's work reached the international stage. In 1994, he went to Washington DC to work at the World Bank, where he chaired the Better Health for Africa Panel, a position that afforded him an opportunity to expand the concept of primary health care to other parts of Africa. Indeed, he produced a blueprint for adopting primary health for all of Africa, and for sustaining health care in Africa for years to come¹.

As Minister, he also openly addressed stigma and the need for sexual health education and services for young people. He also championed an anti-smoking campaign, which made Nigerian manufacturers and importers carry warnings on their tobacco products. In the African region, he will continue to be remembered as the World Bank official who pioneered the Better Health for Africa Initiative. He served as the Chairman of WHO's Executive Board from 1991 to 1992⁴.

Professor Ransome-Kuti was not only a brilliant man, but a nice person with his friends and colleagues who all described him as a kind, caring, wise, gentle, humorous and a direct individual⁵. At the time of his death, Ransome-Kuti was the Chairman of the National Primary Healthcare Development Agency, and had also been penciled in for the post of Health Minister in President Olusegun Obasanjo's new cabinet³.

Despite the general perception that Ransome-Kuti was the best Health Minister Nigeria ever had, his reforms were not without their detractors. He faced opposition from health workers who preferred the old, corrupt system to his innovations. As he himself admitted when he stood down, "my only regret as I leave the ministry is that I have not been able to mobilize all health workers behind the medical system. Most health workers are only interested in how to maintain their position in the hospital system"³.

His global impact

Prof Olikoye Ransome-Kuti left government after the exit of the Babangida regime in 1993, and served as a consultant to the WHO and several African countries. But even out of government, successive administrations in Nigeria sought his advice³.

Professor Ransome-Kuti received numerous awards including the WHO Leon Bernard Award in 1986, in recognition of his outstanding service in the field of Social Medicine. He was honored for over 30 years' work in improving maternal and child health care, and for introducing primary health care into the medical undergraduate curriculum at the University of Lagos. In 1990, he won the UNICEF Maurice Pate Award in recognition of his work in improving the health and welfare of children. He published many research papers and held numerous teaching positions including a visiting professorship at Johns Hopkins University's School of Hygiene and Public Health in Baltimore⁵.

Conclusion

Professor Ransome-Kuti was a genius of his time, a man with a tall vision who lived ahead of his time, a veritable role model and an example in self-discipline, honesty, and transparency. He did more than any of his kind to promote the principles of primary health care and disease prevention in his lifetime, and he was a strong advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality and social justice¹. Many Nigerians admired him for his simplicity, hard work, honesty, and spartan way of life³.

He was a visionary who had an infectious passion for his work, and he went out of his way to encourage this in those who worked with him⁴. He

was unique in his integrity, his devotion to the health of the people of his native land, his powerful advocacy at key international health meetings and in his ability to work with all levels of health workers, doctors, nurses, midwives, and paraprofessionals. A superb clinician, he devoted himself to his patients, but always as a salaried professional, never for private gain. His intelligence, compassion, wisdom, and exceptional honesty earned him such widespread respect among colleagues, students, patients and even politicians. Even when supposedly retired, his work never ended and his achievements are indelibly etched into the foundations of Nigeria's on-going efforts to make life safe, productive and healthy for families, mothers and children².

A quote in the book, "Olikoye" by famous author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, sums it all up "It was because of Olikoye Ransome-Kuti that so many people in Nigeria did not die"⁶.

Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, died in a London hotel while attending a World Health Organization (WHO) conference, on the 1 June 2003.

He was a family man and doting father being married to his wife, Sonia Ransome-Kuti for 50 years and having three children – Dr Dotun

Ransome-Kuti (Veterinary Doctor), Dr Gboyega Ransome-Kuti (Medical Doctor) and Bisoye Ransome-Kuti (Lawyer)⁵.

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