

Adieu Ambassador Felix Awanbor of Nigeria

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Eulogy of the late Ambassador of Nigeria, H.E Felix Awanbor, 21.09.1956 - 15.01.2015

by Dr Obadiah Mailafia, Chef de Cabinet, ACP Secretariat

Nigerians are a highly misunderstood lot. There are Nigerians who evoke our more circumspect, if not judgemental, nature. But Nigerians are also the most generous and most humorous people you will find anywhere in the world. Sadly, it is the few brash and rather supercilious types that some foreigners prefer to see as the image of the "typical Nigerian". There are, of course, good and bad Nigerians. But the good ones are the majority - men and women who stand out by their sheer audacity. Men and women of 'timber and calibre'; men and women of pedigree - of culture, intellect and decorum. The late Felix Awanbor was one of such.

Historically, the Nigerian Foreign Service had a long tradition of bringing out such outstanding men and women. Independence foreign minister Jaja Wachuku was a diplomat of staggering intellect who won several laurels as an outstanding student of Trinity College Dublin. One of our great foreign ministers, Okoi Arikpo, was a jurist, anthropologist and intellectual of the highest order. Among the pioneer crop of Foreign Service officers, Emeka Anyaoku was a classical scholar of distinction who went on to become Secretary-General of the Commonwealth of Nations. UN Ambassador Leslie Harriman could hold his own in the highest royal courts of the world. So svelte and so witty he was. One of the pioneer ambassadors in Brussels, Pius Okigbo of blessed memory, was not only the doyen of Nigerian economics during his lifetime; he was a polymath -- historian, lawyer, economist, successful businessman and chess champion.

Among the younger generation, Judith Attah, Lawrence Agubuzu, Ignatius Olisemeka, Bolaji Akinyemi and Ibrahim Gambari stood out among the common run.

I have gone through this rather circumlocutory route just to make a point. The Nigerian Ambassador in Brussels, in the person of Felix Awanbor, recently deceased, stood among the league of Nigeria's greatest diplomats. It was with immense sorrow and shock that we learned of his passing at a Brussels hospital on Thursday the 15th of January.

For several months he had not particularly enjoyed the best of health. We used to call each other often, but towards winter and Christmas the calls became rarer. Every Christmas since he presented his credentials to the King of Belgium three years ago he always sent us rather generous hampers. He did the same last Christmas. Having taken my annual leave in December and much of January, I regret that I was yet to send him a note to express my gratitude and to wish him and his wife Susan and family the best of 2015. Alas!

The late Felix Edobor Awanbor was born on 21st September 1956 in Benin City, where he grew up. Being of Ishan ethnic stock who are cousins to the great Bini people, he and myself always exchanged notes about the rich tapestry of Bini history and culture which has been traced back to the Egypt of the Pharaohs; with our mutual love for the 800 year old monarchy and for the person of HRH Omo n'Oba n'Edo Uku Akpolopkpolo Oba Erediauwa, the Oba of Benin.

Felix Awanbor studied political science at our premier University of Ibadan, graduating with an Upper 2nd in 1980. He joined the Nigerian Foreign Service in September 1983. He completed all the studies necessary to enter the diplomatic profession at the Foreign Service Academy, graduating in 1983. He later took time off to do a Masters degree in Law and Diplomacy at the University of Lagos. He was posted on diplomatic missions to Tehran, Moscow, New York and Paris before his appointment to Brussels. He had risen by dint of hard work and merit to the rank of Director in the Inspectorate Division of the Foreign Service before being appointed as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg and the European Union.

I recall several discussions we had over his adventures as a young diplomat in Tehran soon after the Iranian Revolution. He gave gory accounts of the devastating war between Iran and Iraq and how, as a young diplomat, he had to deal with several young Nigerian adventurers who joined Saddam Hussein's rag-tag army. He was also in Moscow when the Soviet Empire collapsed and Russia was plunged into economic and political chaos. Ever the diplomat, he had this uncanny ability to recall dramatic situations without betraying any emotions. All you would get is a chuckle and a conspiratorial wink of the eye.

The late Ambassador Awanbor was Nigeria's most outstanding envoy in Brussels in more than a decade. Soon after he assumed duties in Brussels, the Nigerian Embassy, located at the posh Avenue de Tervuren, assumed a new facelift. Always with an eye for detail, he improved the facilities at the Embassy and showed himself to be a consummate administrator. He

managed the resources of the legation with astuteness. The cleanliness of the Embassy as well as its internal and external decor were supernal. He took great care in improving the consular department to ensure greater customer service for Nigerians as well as travellers seeking visas to our country. When I was to travel in December, having misplaced my passport, the Embassy was able to issue me with a new one in exactly one and half hours. It took that long because the online form required 45 minutes to be completed. I do not know of many embassies that can beat that record.

With the support of his highly able and loyal Deputy Chief of Mission, H. E. Ambassador Rabiul Ibrahim, the late Felix Awanbor reached out to the Nigerian Diaspora community in a way that no other Ambassador had done in the past. These gentlemen made us feel that we were their concern. Towards the end of the year he constituted a team headed by my humble self to review all Nigerian Diaspora organisations and to bring up suggestions on how to streamline them and make them more coherent and effective. I am happy that we were able to complete our report on time and it was under his kind consideration at the time of his death.

Whenever distinguished Nigerians came to Brussels, they would arrange for us to meet with them. They did the same when President Goodluck Jonathan was in Brussels and when several ministers and personalities such as John Cardinal Onaiyekan came to the European capital.

The late Ambassador Awanbor was generous with entertainment, but was far from being ostentatious. The Nigerian Independence Day ball was asterisked in the calendar of people in diplomatic circles in Brussels. He was also instrumental in organising several investment missions by Belgians looking to do business with our country. He had appointed me Keynote Speaker during last year's first ever Belgium-Nigeria Investment Summit. It was thanks to his work that the Wallonia Region opened a commercial office in Lagos, Nigeria's economic capital. The late Ambassador also assisted several Nigerian bankers and industrialists to access lines of credit from the mammoth European Investment Bank (EIB).

Felix Edobor Awanbor was not only an outstanding diplomat; he was a civil servant par excellence; an astute administrator, a distinguished patriot and a devoted husband and father. He never felt the need to be loquacious or rude. His interventions during meetings of the ACP Committee of Ambassadors were spare and parsimonious. You would never catch him grandstanding or being flippant or obnoxious.

Of a humble disposition, Felix Awanbor was mild-mannered and humane; loving the Lord greatly and worshipping quietly in His temple.

The late Ambassador and I shared a common love and admiration for one of Nigeria's greatest public servants, late Chief Simeon Adebayo. Unbeknown to both us, we were associated with the late Chief at about the same time but in different capacities. Chief Simeon Adebayo was Chairman of the prestigious Nigerian National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) where I was a Research Fellow in my early twenties. I considered it a great honour whenever he allowed me merely to hold his bag. A towering intellect, extraordinary human being, jurist, statesman and international civil servant, the renowned Harvard economist and one of the prime architects of Nigeria's first national development plan, Wolfgang Stolper, described Chief Adebayo as "one of the most outstanding human beings" he had ever met anywhere in the world.

To me, Felix Awanbor was not just an esteemed Ambassador of my country; he was a man I loved and admired greatly -- a friend who was also a brother. I grieve for him in the way King David grieved for his brother Jonathan: "Your beauty O Israel, is slain on your high places! How have the mighty fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult...."

God is our refuge and our help in the encircling gloom, says my spiritual father John Henry Cardinal Newman. May He comfort us in these dark times and may He put His wings around H.E. Mrs. Susan Awanbor, the children and all he has left behind.

De profundis ad te, Domini clamavi.

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