

# An Arduous Climb: From the Creeks of the Niger Delta to Leading Obstetrician and University Vice Chancellor

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The book “An Arduous Climb: From the Creeks of the Niger Delta to Leading Obstetrician and University Vice Chancellor” ref (1) is the work of Kelsey A. Harrison. Although an autobiography, the book addresses broader issues with vivid narratives extending from historical accounts relating to the social, economic, and political development of Nigeria in the author’s time and at the same time rendering a good account of academic growth in Nigeria over the past years. It tells the story and tales of the adventurous life of the author from the colonial era to post-independence in a vivid and insightful manner that portrays the aspirations, struggles, trials, intrigues, frustrations and eventual triumph that characterized his life.

The 389-paged book carefully woven into 22 chapters can be divided into four broad sections, each dealing with various phases of the author’s life and career. Section one comprising chapters one and two narrates the author’s birth and early life in Abonnema and his elementary and secondary school education in eastern Nigeria. Section two is made of chapters three and four and is concerned with the author’s undergraduate and postgraduate medical education at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and the University College Hospital in London, UK. The third section comprising chapters six to 11 chronicles the author’s early life in academic medicine beginning at the University of Ibadan and progressing to his career in Ahmadu Bello University in Northern Nigeria. The fourth section made up of chapters 12 to 16, narrates tales of the author’s experiences as a leading administrator in his capacity as Vice Chancellor of University of Port Harcourt towards the tail end of the twentieth century. Chapters 17 to 22 are more in-depth elaboration of major events covered in sections three and four; chapters 17, 18 and 19 detail the author’s efforts in conducting the Zaria Maternity Survey, editing a textbook titled “Maternity Care in Developing Countries”, and also elaborated more extensively on the issue of vesico-vaginal fistula. Chapters 20 to 22 are devoted to closing remarks, recognition of accomplishments both locally and internationally, the author’s love for the game of cricket and his eventual retirement and relocation to Finland where he now lives.

While these divisions may be relevant in highlighting key landmark activities and experiences that characterized the author’s life, one thing stands out clearly; the entire book is a continuum, really difficult to separate into artificial sections as we have attempted to do here. However, it is possible to discern certain key characteristics of each section in the author’s life that make such sectional arrangement purposeful in this review.

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The book begins with a salutary narrative of the Kalabari people, its early contact with European commercial and religious interest, first with trade in slaves and later palm oil. The picture of Abonnema in the mid-twentieth century portray that of a functional and well-organized society metamorphosing from a traditional community to modernity, with the establishment of European trade posts and with it the introduction of western education and Christianity. The Abonnema community gradually accepted the new civilization despite initial skepticism and the younger generations were to later fully embrace western education and culture with all its challenges and successes that characterized the author's career. His experiences in elementary school typify the highly organized and focused arrangements that characterized education in pre- and early post-independence Nigeria. The system recognized values of hard work, high morality and good ethical conduct on the part of the home, pupils and the school system. Each of these agencies carried out its responsibilities with stoic conviction and determination to succeed. The home having embraced Christianity backed by high morality and ethical values ensured that children are exposed to good tutelage as exemplified by the author's narrative of a new day beginning with morning prayers conducted by the head of the household, followed by domestic chores and preparation for school. The elementary school system, backed by a strong Native Administration and the Church, placed high premium on acquisition of didactic knowledge, preparing the child for future responsibilities while at the same time exposing the pupils to experiences that will consolidate the foundation in good morals and ethics set by the home. The system rewarded hard work and excellence in academic achievement; these attributes of society provided the enabling environment that saw the author through to secondary education at Government College, Umuahia. Teaching and learning from elementary

School at Abonnema to Government College, Umuahia is webbed into a continuum with essentially similar values, recognizing excellence in academic achievement and good training in character. Hence, we see the author mature in his academic pursuit under the tutelage of dedicated and committed teachers and instructors and a friendly natural surrounding offered by the warm climatic conditions in tropical Africa.

The author's journey from secondary education to undergraduate studies in medicine at the University of Ibadan characterized the experiences of a hardworking and highly talented personality. His excellent academic achievements nurtured by friendly mentoring offered by his teachers at Government College, Umuahia and the cooperation of the Eastern Nigerian Government and later Federal Government of Nigeria scholarships made possible adequate financing of his undergraduate medical education beginning at the University of Ibadan and completed later at the University of London in the United Kingdom. From the little Niger Delta community in Abonnema to Government College, Umuahia, both in Eastern Nigeria to University of Ibadan in Western Nigeria and eventually the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century, one can only imagine the efforts and struggles required to achieve the academic feat recorded by the author. One thing is certain, the author's determination to reach his goals in life, excellence in academic achievement, melted the difficulties to nothingness. The end result of the author's medical training at the University of London with distinction grades and a Gold Medal in Obstetrics and Gynecology tells it all.

Back home in Ibadan in post-independence Nigeria, the author readily and easily settled to clinical practice with heavy emphasis in academic medicine under the guidance of his mentor, the late Professor J.B. Lawson. Giving the pre-eminent role of Ibadan in University education in Nigeria, it is little wonder that the University became the melting point of intellectualism and

higher educational pursuit in post-independence Nigeria. University of Ibadan became home to intellectuals from all regions of Nigeria and neighboring West African states. However, this atmosphere fostering academic growth and excellence was brutally interrupted by the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. In search for safety, academics of Eastern Nigeria extraction fled University of Ibadan, giving room for unbalanced ethnic dominance by the host ethnic group, the Yoruba. The author's family turned out to be one of several casualties of the civil war. The author's involvement in reconstructive maternity care in his native Rivers State while the war lasted and his struggle to keep pace with his career in academic medicine left little room for the much need attention to his young family of a wife and two young kids at Ibadan. The neglect and ensuing frustration led to the departure of his wife with his two young kids to the United Kingdom towards the end of the Nigerian civil war. Added to the author's frustration and alienation from family, is the ethnic texture of academic leadership in post-war University of Ibadan; the failure of colleagues of Eastern Nigeria extraction that constituted a palpable proportion of academia in the pre-war University of Ibadan to return to the institution at the end of the war gave little room for survival of the author's academic aspirations. This was the scenario that saw the author left University of Ibadan for Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in Northern Nigeria in 1972. Despite the setbacks experienced in his early academic career at Ibadan, there were several instances of achievement recorded in that era; of note were his research on Anemia in Pregnancy, Abnormal Hemoglobins and Pregnancy, Diseases of the Trophoblasts and an MD Thesis submitted to the University of London in 1969. Other landmark achievements of this era include the successful establishment of the Abadina Domiciliary Maternity Center and the post-war reconstruction of maternity services in his native Rivers State.

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria provided the greatest opportunity for the growth and maturation of the author's academic aspirations. Several factors added to shape the author's career in Zaria; an already existing Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Ahmadu Bello University with little or no emphasis on research, the cooperation of senior academic staff of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, particularly the expatriates and the availability of a largely unstudied population with high rate of maternal morbidity and mortality. The development of a functional clinical and academic Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the accompanying Zaria Maternity Survey considerably pre-occupied the author's days in Zaria. Hard work backed by a functional and focused leadership and assistance from his mentors including late Professor John Lawson and Frank Hytten brought success to the author's career in Zaria. Evidence that the efforts paid off were attested by the expansion of clinical and research facilities both in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and other Departments of the Institute of Health in Ahmadu Bello University. Research flourished with increase in success rate in both the local and foreign postgraduate training programs, and increased inter-departmental research collaborations. The success story of the Zaria Maternity Survey on the author's career both locally and in the international scene were epitomized in the October 1985 supplement edition of the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology. Details of the study, vividly described in Chapter 17, illustrate the monumental effort that made the study possible. This singular endeavor, the Zaria Maternity Survey, gave an extraordinary local and international dimension to the issue of high maternal mortality in developing countries. With it also is the metamorphosis of the author to the status of an authority on International Maternal Health issues, strongly advocating women empowerment through education for all and

increased manpower development for obstetric care in developing countries. Several unhealthy developments bordering on power struggle and inordinate acquisition of unearned academic status and glory during the author's tenure as Dean of Medicine at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in addition to worrisome religious crises and intolerance and pressing family responsibilities back home in Abonnema necessitated the author's decision to relocate from Zaria to University of Port Harcourt in his native Rivers State.

Had the author ended up just as a successful obstetrician and academic without the singular opportunity to serve as a Vice Chancellor at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigerian and in fact the entire humanity would have been cheated. Sociologists, political scientists, public policy makers and administrators and analysts would have been the greatest losers. The narrative on his period as Vice Chancellor at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria brought to focus issues of frightening and multidimensional implications in contemporary Nigeria. The main question the narrative has posed for interested minds is "What is responsible for the complete reversal from an orderly, well-organized, focused and functional institutional arrangement for academic and societal advancement that characterized Nigeria of the mid-twentieth century to the complete chaos in higher institutions in Nigeria in the closing years of the twentieth century, epitomized by events witnessed by the author as Vice Chancellor at the University of Port Harcourt. Heart-breaking and nerve-racking tales of decay, violence, corruption and academic decadence in Nigeria's elite institutions have taken their toll on society and citizenry. Greed and unearned riches nurtured corruption to a deafening and frightening level in the country's institutions. Secret cultism, once an unfamiliar phenomenon in institutions of higher learning acquired notoriety and took center stage in the affairs of academic institutions. As a Vice

Chancellor, the author was caught in the center of the cross fire of these vices. As someone who always wanted to take constructive action, he was confronted with the harsh realities of the twin evils of corruption and cultism. Throughout the drama, he made spirited and concerted efforts to change things for the better. As he clearly noted himself, he was unable to change the situation but he succeeded in denting a lasting blow to these evils. The greatest victims of the entire crises were learning and academic advancement in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

A final question is "Who are the heroes and heroines of this narrative? Several of them come to mind; members of the author's extended family tree in Abonnema, the various institutions and their designated officials, his several mentors within and outside Nigeria that saw the author through in his career both as a practicing and academic obstetrician and administrator, and the International Maternal Health Care Network. Special heroes and heroines also are the author's immediate family whose sacrifices and deprivations made his career and the book possible. Undoubtedly, the author, himself is the chief hero; the entire book is woven around his metamorphosis from the Creeks of the Niger Delta to becoming a Leading International Obstetrician and University Vice Chancellor. The book is recommended to all; from the elementary school pupil to University academics, public administrators and policy makers and all other interested minds who wish to see things change for the better in Nigeria and other developing countries. It is a compelling read.

#### REFERENCES

1. Kelsey A. Harrison. *An Arduous Climb: From the Creeks of the Niger Delta to a leading obstetrician and Gynecologist and University Vice-Chancellor* – Publishers: Adonis Abbey Publishers Ltd London, UK ISBN-1-905068395 (PB), 1-905068-42-5 (HB) 2006