

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



What's in a name

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That which we call a rose

By any other name

Would smell as sweet.

(Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet)

So declaims Juliet to Romeo but this is Shakespeare at his most ironic, for it is precisely because of his surname (Montague) that Romeo's love for Juliet (Capulet) is doomed. Even though the name is "hateful to me" it is because of it that he is killed by the capulets. Love across the divides of clan, culture, religion, ethnicity and nationality remains problematical.

At this time in Nigeria, there is a conflict between the Edet and Kam Salem families, from two different areas, religions and cultures, over the name of the new Police Force Headquarters in Abuja. Because of the current political situation, the conflict has spread to embrace eminent persons on each side of the divide and is the subject of press comments and editorials.

As Chief of F.R.A. Williams puts it, "In my humble opinion, I do not consider it appropriate either for the family of the late Louis Orok Edet or the family of late Alhaji Kam Salem to find themselves involved in any controversy over the matter.

"Each of the families has produced distinguished Nigerians who had served their nation as Inspector General of Police. Nigeria is proud of them.

"This question of naming the Police Force Headquarters after the late Louis Orok Edet ought never to have caused any controversy whatsoever." (Guardian, May 27, 2001).

Nonetheless, what this unnecessary dispute has revealed is the great importance people attach to the historical preservation of the names/life stories of history makers.

It is a shame that neither in their lifetimes nor posthumously have biographies been written about them. At least not to my knowledge: readers, please correct me. Then the public and posterity would have the records of their life stories at hand. Both names are fast receding from their memory.

It is also regrettable that neither man left behind an autobiography or memoir which would have been an enduring legacy and record. As Rudyard Kipling puts it:

"If I have given you delight by aught that I have done.

Let me lie quiet in that night which shall be yours anon.

And for the little, little span the dead are borne in mind.

Seek not to question other than the book I leave behind."

To obtain information about the two Inspectors-General, I had to consult an African who's who and books "left behind" by other makers of history. It is revealing that most of the data thus obtained was on Edet.

Louis Orok Edet, born in 1913, in Calabar, joined the police force as a clerk in 1931. He transferred to general duties as a sub-inspector in 1945. Edet was involved in the spate of killings in Calabar province, known as "Leopard Men" murder, one of the most dramatic police investigations and court cases in Nigerian history.

In 1948, he was transferred to the western provinces and promoted the next year to Assistant superintendent. Over the next ten years, Edet was sent to the U.K. for various specialized training courses.

At independence, Edet was the most senior Nigerian police officer as Deputy Police Commissioner. He was appointed commander of the first contingent of the Nigerian Police Force to serve under the United Nations in Congo. Edet was much commended for his service in the Congo and was awarded the Queen's

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Police Medal.

On his return to Nigeria, Edet was appointed commissioner in charge of police in the federal capital territory of Lagos. He was promoted to Deputy Inspector General in 1962 under John Hodge, the last expatriate Inspector General. The significance of Edet's high position is better appreciated when it is realized that in 1963, four out of the six commissioners, four out of the six deputy commissioners, twelve out of the seventeen assistant commissioners, and seventeen out of forty superintendents were expatriates.

In March 1964, Louis Orok Edet was appointed to succeed Hodge as the first indigenous Inspector General of the Nigeria Police Force. Just months later came a controversial federal election that severely taxed the peace-keeping skills of the police and its head. Edet made a dramatic and unprecedented broadcast on the national radio services appealing, in the interest of security, for all political appointees and candidates to observe a list of Eight Don'ts which the ministry of information and the police had compiled. Although the election was marred by abuses and the result caused a political crisis, the police maintained overall law and order.

At the time of the coup, the police could muster far more able-bodied men than the army which had less than ten thousand men. The police,

counting local government and native authority forces, had had a force of thirty thousand.

The massacres in the Northern region in 1966 showed the limit of the police to maintain law and order but the Nigerian police force did not break up as the army did.

Because Edet was on leave from Lagos on January 15, 1966, it was Kam Salem who acted as Inspector-General. He displayed commendable organizing ability and initiative. The police headquarters in Lagos in Lion House became the operations center for the 48 hours of confusion and uncertainty which followed the coup. There, Kam Salem Leslie Marsden; the expatriate acting deputy Inspector-General of police; Ahmed Kurfi, the Deputy Permanent Secretary Ministry of Defence; and Hamman Maiduguri, and others, established what really had happened and finally Ironsi. It was Kam Salem who took the initiative of approaching the defence attaché in the British High Commission for possible military assistance (turned down by the British government when contacted).

Chief Awolowo refers to Edet in his book, "My March Through Prison". He believed that Edet considered that he (Awolowo) was party to the January 15 coups of 1966. During the first coup, Edet was on leave in Calabar where Awolowo was imprisoned. It was announced that the coup leader had planned to release Awolowo and install him as the head of state. Edet sent a superintendent of police to the prison to confirm that Awolowo was still in his cell. When the superintendent confirmed he was there, Edet was still not convinced and demanded he return to double-check.

A few days after the second coup, when Gowon emerged as head of state, Awolowo was released from prison and invited to join the government. At the same time, Louis Edet was retired by Gowon as inspector-General, although it was publicly announced that Edet had resigned.

Louis Orok Edet was awarded the Nigerian honor, OFR and the British CBE. He was awarded a medal by Pope Paul VI. It is only fitting that the new headquarters of the institution he helped to build and served so well for forty years should be named after him.

Chief Rotimi Williams signposts the political dangers of the dispute:

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This time around, the names are Edet/Kam Salem, it could be that next time the names might be Margaret Ekpo/Gambo Sawaba, which proves the timelessness of the statement by Horace:

"Change the name and the tale is about you".