

How Much Land Does a Man Need?

Tribute to Dr. Christopher Kolade

By Muyiwa Adetiba

About a decade and a half ago, I had worked with Dr Christopher Abiodun Kolade on his memoirs. We met two, three times a week over a stretch to help put his thoughts together, and because of this experience, I can claim to know more about him than many people alive. It was perhaps, one of the most pleasant experiences of my professional, or even personal life. 'There must be something he saw in you for him to have chosen you' observed his sister when I met her to get her contributions to the book. It was a sentiment echoed by another childhood friend of his. This sentiment made me feel very privileged knowing Dr Kolade was not flippant. In fact, he was a thoughtful, deliberate and rational person with a very lucid and logical mind. People like him are not given to impulses easily. He was, in addition, a very religious man who often waited to be guided by the Holy Spirit before taking a decision. I don't know what Dr Kolade saw in me. But I knew very early in our relationship that he had my time. I can even dare say he had a soft spot for me. Shortly before he left Cadbury as its Chairman, I had asked him if he could be the Chairman of a company I was about to promote. Not only did he accept, he also invested in it. Having his name on board increased investors' confidence in the project and eased my job as promoter considerably. Everyone I approached wanted to be associated with a company that involved Dr Kolade. Even the Chairman of the bank we were going to use simply wanted an assurance of Dr Kolade's commitment to the project and we were good to go. It was a concrete evidence that a good name goes way beyond where money or real estate can ever reach. From his punctuality to meetings, to his adroit use of time and confident control of proceedings, I learnt a lot about preparing for meetings and carrying the Board along. He was a meticulous and transparent leader of men.

Like I said, I don't know what he saw in me. But I know what I saw in him and what I saw, I admired. First, I saw a good communicator when I first interviewed him as the Director General of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in the 70s. That, and his intellect were easy to spot. Then, as I got closer, I saw a very simple man despite his accomplishments. He was a very humane man who saw beyond people's station in life and treated everyone with decorum – to him, a driver is also the head of his family and so should be treated with respect. I saw a man who cared deeply about family and family values and would almost, always ask about your spouse – in my case, my wife was once his student at the Lagos Business School. I saw a man who always tried to make himself accessible to those he thought were sincere in their desire for knowledge or advice – 'if a young person is courageous enough to approach me with a concern they think I can help resolve; the least I can do is make myself available'. He once told me. I saw a man who applied himself and devoted his considerable talent to whatever he set himself to do, be it music, the pulpit or the boardroom. I saw a man who treated success and adversity with stoic faith – the way he handled the death of his son and the things he told me shortly after, would always be a 'lamp unto my feet' in my spiritual journey. I saw and admired a principled man who set a high moral standard for himself and tried to teach his formal and informal students to follow his school of thought.

I recall our first meeting shortly after he came back as High Commissioner. He was about thirty minutes late, which to Dr Kolade was a lot. He apologized profusely and claimed the traffic along Ajah was heavier than usual. I asked him why he felt he still



needed to go through the rigors of traffic to get to Pan Africa University every day. Hadn't he earned the right to rest his feet? The first part of his answer which was that no one had earned the right to retire until the good Lord said so, humbled me. The second part was 'besides, I like to teach. And if it is only one more student that I can covert to my school of thought, I am satisfied'. This school of thought, includes keeping your head and doing the right thing when all around you are losing theirs – 'oasis of sanity' he called it.

Finally, I will mention what I admire most in him by recounting this short tale. It is a story of a man who felt the best way to secure his financial future was to go into real estate. Unfortunately, the more he acquired, the more the possibility of even more. In his quest for more land, he came across a family willing to sell virgin land at a give-away price. A prospective buyer could own whatever land his legs could carry him through for a pittance. The only caveat was that he had to get back to the starting block by sunset. Many lost out, carried away as it were, by the desire- or greed – to take as much land as possible. This man was no exception. He also went too far. And in his determination to make it back to the starting block by sunset, he over exerted himself and collapsed just as the sun was slipping behind the clouds. In the end, he was given only the land he really needed – a six square feet final home. It is a story of Nigeria and Nigerians. Very few Nigerians are content with only what they need.

In Dr Kolade, I saw and admired a man who lived within his means and was not enticed by more and more 'real estate'. Fate and hard work got him to the peak of at least, four different vocations. He could easily have lined his pockets along the way. But he chose not to be an average Nigerian. He was a contented man who rose above the usual primitive acquisition of wealth and lived from his Cadbury years till his death, in a modest bungalow in a quiet, middle class area in mainland Lagos. In the end, his achievements at every turn, not wealth, spoke for him and represented his persona. His life showed one didn't need to be deemed wealthy to be a success. He was not defined by wealth. He was my kind of man. May God rest his soul.