

## BOOK REVIEW

**Book Title: “OPEYEMI OKE: A BENCHMARK ON THE BENCH”**

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Book reviews help potential readers become familiar with what a book is about, give them an idea of how they themselves might react to it, and above all determine whether a potential book will be of interest to them. In this context, my task this morning therefore is to assist this distinguished audience to validate the worthiness or otherwise of the book titled, ***“Opeyemi Oke: A Benchmark on the Bench.”***

This serious work of scholarship is a gripping story of how a young girl metamorphosed into a dutiful mother, a successful career woman, an eminent jurist who positively impacted on the Administration of Justice and gave stature to social justice, and an adorable grandmother. ***“Opeyemi Oke: A Benchmark on the Bench”*** is fascinating both for what it reveals about the family life of the 16<sup>th</sup> Chief Judge of the High Court of Lagos State (the 6<sup>th</sup> woman to hold that exalted position), and for what it tells us about her exemplar career, particularly, how she adroitly ensured that fear, needless hostility and suspicions were not allowed to haunt her life, or leave their imprint on her mental state in ways that easily could have derailed the historical moment we are sharing today.

For decades, law has been viewed as complex and only understood by a select few. With particular reference to Nigeria, dismal outcomes and inconsistencies of some decisions emanating from the judiciary have given rise to distrust of the legal system and public disdain for law. I suspect it was in recognition of this challenge facing the law that the author, Chidi Oguamanam brilliantly co-mingled the social life and meteoric career progression of the biographee; both to espouse the normative value and purpose of the judiciary in an unadorned manner that would interest a broader audience beyond the legal community, and at the same time give leverage to the fact that a balance can effectively be achieved between professional and personal life priorities for women in the legal profession. One is therefore not surprised the erudition, skill and care with which the author brightly achieved these two goals. Beyond being a Professor of Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa,

Canada, the author is an outstanding academic and accomplished scholar whose admirable career has been immensely noteworthy in the national and global communities.

***“Opeyemi Oke: A Benchmark on the Bench*** is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter vividly captures the family background of the biographee, the delightful years of childhood and formative influences of parents, family members, tutors and teachers during the teenage years. In chapter two, the reader is taken through the undergraduate and postgraduate years that obviously deepened her solid humanistic education. Chapter three provides detailed analysis of how she started her career in 1982 as a Youth Corper in the legal Department of the Federal Housing Authority, before moving in 1986 to the Lower Bench, the Magistracy where she rose to the position of Chief Magistrate.

The two life and death encounters that she experienced during this period are a compelling read. Of note, by the time she became a Chief Magistrate, she had not only earned for herself a reputation of judicial excellence, she was also recognized as a jurist deeply concerned with social justice, and who was living her commitment to same. Her empathetic adjudicatory capacities are easily recognizable from such cases as ***Rtd. Maj-Gen David Ejoor ‘Love Tangle case; The Tyranny of Sirens; and Obtaining Bail by False Pretense*** which the author recounted in a way that only an astute seminal mind could do. Again, that she has always been consistently fearless and never timorous when justice so requires came out clear in Magistrate Oke sued at the Aiyelala Juju Court. The chapter is a powerful plea for judicial officers to fervently seek to uphold the course of justice.

Chapter four focuses on Opeyemi Oke’s appointment as a Judge of the High Court in July, 1996. She served variously as Chairperson, Armed Robbery and Firearms Tribunal; member of the Local Government Election Petition Tribunal; and later as Chair of the Lagos State local Government Appeal Tribunal. One can easily deduce from the several incidents to which the author referred that retired Justice Oke was a jurist imbued with formidable intellect, independence of thought, and admirable vigor. She had a deep understanding of the law and this she merged with an equally deep understanding of the values that drive impartial adjudication and social justice.

A sad development that is becoming a common occurrence in our courts is when judicial officers verbally assault, bully, and harass lawyers appearing before them, or when lawyers (silk or non-silk) unprofessionally act in ways that are discourteous to the court. The author’s narration revealed that retired Justice Oke right from when

she was a magistrate distinguished herself as a jurist whose court remained a solemn, dignified and civilized forum conducive for the sacred duty of administration of justice. She always remained firm, principled and in control of her court, and, would never shout insults at Counsel or disrespect them. No matter how irritable Counsel may be, retired Justice Opeyemi Oke made it a habit never to lose her temper, composure or make scurrilous remarks.

Chapters five to eight reveal how the biographee admirably availed herself substantial opportunity of professional engagements and skill acquisition. She consistently and continuously replicated the knowledge gained for the benefit of the system at every turn that she had opportunity to drive judicial reforms. She also devoted time to ensure that the law students on pupillage to her court had full benefit of her rich repertoire of knowledge. In the words of the very cerebral Honourable Justice Abiru, JCA ***"Justice Oke possesses amazing capacity for hardwork, invests abundantly in self-development and engages with ease in scholarly pursuits"***.

There is a great deal of exposition in the book of the various roles that retired Justice Oke played in the activities that led to: the 2004 Civil Procedures Rules; the Lagos Multi-Door Court house aimed at Mainstreaming Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR); the initiation of the Backlog Elimination Program (BEP), which was aimed at tackling backlog of cases some of which dated over seventy years; the injection of Life into Lagos Court of Arbitration (LCA); the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Division and the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Division; and the establishment of a Small Claims Court under the magistracy as part of the fast-track justice delivery initiative. Her positive imprints are also found in the inauguration of the Restorative Justice Centre to mediate inter-citizen conflicts or minor criminal matters as a direct program on prison decongestion; the Creation of Senior Citizen Help Centres (SCHC) to offer judicial and legal services to the elderly (60 years and above); and prioritization of capacity building and continuing professional development across all cadres of staff of the Lagos State Judiciary. These are the enduring legacies she has left, and which will remain indelible in the sands of time. Perhaps, the most fitting summary of the views of her colleagues is that of the current Chief Judge of Lagos State, the highly respected Honourable Justice Kazeem Alogba who described retired Justice Opeyemi Olufunmilayo Oke as ***"an inspiring team worker and pacesetter"***.

The final chapter is an up-close and personal reflection on 'Grandma Justice' as retired Justice Oke's grandchildren call her, and why she is forever living a life of gratitude to God. The author's reminiscence of the biographee's ascendancy to the

position of Chief Judge of Lagos State was one of many incidents that were unforgettable moments that God took control. Reading though the author's narration "...of the desperation and blackmail by a few that masked as opposition to the biographee's ascendancy..." to the exalted position of the Chief Judge, the reader can sense that the author had more information than he dared to disclose. The author was clearly struggling with facts that may turn out to be bombshell and the need for extreme care not to 'rock the boat'. This apparently goes in line with the Yoruba idiom: "*Ijapa ni ti a ba de ibi iru, ki a foo*". This can be translated to mean that one should not allow for indiscretion in matters that can further deepen divisions or become the shotgun that will escalate hate. The author is to be greatly commended for this.

That, however, leads me to the current self-sustaining approach of the Lagos State Government which, in line with long standing precedent, sustains the tradition of seniority at the Bench. In this respect, Lagos State remains a shining example for the rest of the country for fostering stability in the transition and succession order in the judiciary.

***Opeyemi Oke: A Benchmark on the Bench*** is without doubt a most entertaining account of retired Justice Opeyemi Oke's life and a scholarly monument and admirable account of her stewardship as a judicial officer. It also fulfils the valuable function of crystallizing insightful thoughts on a number of issues fundamental to the legal profession. The book is marked by clarity of writing and a nice balance of illustrative detail of cases. The breath of the contents, the simplicity of the exposition, and the warmth of the author's style are to be greatly commended. The book has equally been attractively presented. The cover is adorned with the stunningly elegant photograph of the biographee with one of her trademark eyeglasses.

***Opeyemi Oke: A Benchmark on the Bench*** will certainly be an excellent resource to students of law, the Bar, the Bench and other legal enthusiasts.

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***15<sup>th</sup> November, 2019***