

## TRIBUTE TO JONATHAN CHUKWUEMEKA OKAFOR



Jonathan Chukwuemeka Okafor, popularly called JC, a staunch member of the Society, a renowned plant taxonomist, an ethnobotanist, forest conservator, agro-forester and author died on 3rd February, 2021.

He was born on 22nd October, 1934, at Ukpok, Nnewi-South Local Government Area of Anambra State, and was educated at Central School, Onitsha (1940-48), Merchants of Light School, Oba (1949-53), School of Forestry, Ibadan (1954-55), Dundee Technical College, Scotland (1958-59), Aberdeen University (1959-62), Oxford University (1964-65), and University of Ibadan (1975-81).

He began his forestry career as a Forest Assistant, Federal Department of Forest Research, Ibadan in 1954; served as a Lecturer, School of Forestry, Ibadan; Research Officer In/Charge Taxonomy and Forest Herbarium, Ibadan (FHI), before transferring his services in 1975 to the Forestry Commission, Enugu, in the old Anambra State, where he rose through the ranks to become the Chief Conservator of Forests in 1986, retiring in 1989. He also served as the founder and pioneer curator of the Enugu Forest Herbarium.

On retirement, Jonathan Okafor set up Fame Agricultural Centre, and Tree Crops and Tropical Ecology Consultants outfit, in Enugu, with a nursery and orchards, and facilities for training enthusiasts in conservation strategies and ethnomedicine. From this base he continued his decades-long engagements as part-time lecturer in universities in the South-East, rising to the position of adjunct Professor in Imo State University (1996), University of Nigeria,

Nsukka (2007), and Ebonyi State University (2008), holding the last two positions until his death. From his Enugu base, he also continued to provide consultancy services to many national and international organizations, on biodiversity conservation, agroforestry, bioprospecting, environmental protection and landscaping, among many other areas. It was a delight for me to work with him in 1990, on the forest survey towards setting up Cross River National Park.

Among the many contributions made by Jonathan Okafor as a taxonomist, perhaps the most substantial and notable are his contributions of the chapters on *Araliaceae*, *Boraginaceae*, *Bignoniaceae*, *Verbenaceae* and *Avicenniaceae* in *Nigerian Trees* Vol. II (Keay et al., 1964). He was widely published and contributed conference papers extensively both internationally and locally, including his contribution on plants to our 2010 symposium on Endangered Species in Nigeria, marking the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the Society (see *Nigerian Field* 75:50-63).

Jonathan Okafor associated his taxonomic pursuits strongly with cultural uses of plants, especially as food or medicine, justifying his profiling as an ethnobotanist with interest in ethnomedicine. In this regard, it is noteworthy that he worked on woody plants of nutritional importance in farming systems of the humid tropics for his Ph.D. degree at the University of Ibadan (Okafor, 1981), and sought, among other things, to establish ways of improving such plants to make them popular in farming systems. An abiding legacy left by Jonathan Okafor from this work is the introduction and popularization of techniques for inducing early fruiting of trees such as *Dacryodes edulis* (the African pear), *Irvingia gabonensis* (the wild mango) and *Treculia africana* (the breadfruit tree), which immediately made such trees popular for use in agro-forestry systems, because of their shortened life cycles. Trees that would normally take seven or more years to fruit were made, in some cases, to fruit in less than three years. This achievement, no doubt, enhanced Jonathan Okafor's reputation and the demand for his services as an agro-forester.

A fitting summary of Jonathan Okafor's work in the area of ethnomedicine is, perhaps, provided by his book *Tropical Plants in Health Care Delivery in Nigeria* (Book Builders Editions Africa, 2013), although the title of the book conceals Jonathan Okafor's international reach in treating traditional use of plants in health care. The author of the book himself in his conclusion to the preface of the book, in fact, states that the 'book is a taxonomic, ethnobotanical and useful guide or manual for achieving healing and healthy status among people in Nigeria, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Ghana and South Africa'.

Jonathan Okafor received many awards for his contributions to knowledge and humanity. Apart from being a member of many professional associations, including the International Horticultural Society and the Nigerian Field Society, and being Vice Chairman/Taxonomist of the Association for Scientific Identification, Conservation and Utilization of Medicinal Plants of Nigeria (ASICUMPON), he was on the Editorial/Advisory Boards of over seven journals including the *International Tree Crops Journal*, UK. He was a Fellow of the Linnean

Society (FLS), Fellow of the Forestry Association of Nigeria (FFAN) and a Fellow of the Nigerian Society of Botanists (FNSB). He served as a member of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) National Committee, and was on the National Expert Team on Underutilized Indigenous Crops and Animals of the Federal Ministry Science and Technology,

He was interred in his place of birth, Ukpok, Anambra State, on 8th April, 2021. Left to mourn him are his immediate and extended families, and a wide range of national and international friends, colleagues and associates.

The Nigerian Field Society extends deep condolences to his families and dear ones. May the illustrious and gentle soul of **Professor Jonathan Chukwuemeka Okafor** Rest in Perfect Peace.

DAVID OKALI

*Ibadan, Nigeria*

E-mail: d\_okali@yahoo.com; okalidaid2@gmail.com

*20th April, 2021.*