

Father's Day: The Nigerian Nostalgia Project Revives My Father After His Death

Grieving my father's death in New England, I find joy and comfort in an online group that connects me to memories of my father teaching in a rural high school in Nigeria.

June 16, 2024 by [Karen Propp](#). [The Good Men Project](#)



On the first Father's Day after my father died, I sit in my childhood bedroom surrounded by the wood carvings and bright textiles we had brought home to the States from Nigeria. I want to stay there all morning looking at the Yoruba masks and the blue *adire* cloth that I had arranged on little tables and shelves. I feel unmoored in the world, heavy with loss, and weary from the past four years of my father's wheelchair bound life. I want the talking drum and the finger piano and the raffia baskets to time travel me back to the happiness of a long-ago when I ran barefoot around the compound with a pack of other kids. I want to know again the thrill of finding a scorpion shell in a ditch and clambering over the iroko tree felled in the rainy

season. To ride my Schwinn down the steepest hill, no hands on the handlebar, and then lie on the grass to watch a praying mantis lift her leg.

We were in Africa because my father was teaching at a rural high school in a project funded by USAID, Harvard University, and the newly independent country of Nigeria. I learned to read in Nigeria. I have no memory of being afraid or lonely during those years; that came later, in the leafy suburb with the good schools.

In the house where I am breathing in calabash and indigo.

The house where my father died, his head on the pillow, his eyes closed to the window of afternoon light. We stayed with him, listening to the oxygen tank keep time like a metronome, and counted how many breaths. For as long as we could we warmed his hands in ours and watched the flesh tighten around the bones in his face.

“He had a long life,” my siblings and I said to one another and to the condolence callers who came to gather with us. “We’ll miss him, too.”

And now we are emptying the home where we grew up. My sister is in our father’s study, lingering over every letter, birthday card, and bill before placing it in piles she’s marked Keep, Recycle, or Toss. My brother stands in the driveway and hurls objects into a dumpster: a tricycle, a moldy tent, broken skis. I open a box to find an unmailed postcard. It’s addressed to my grandparents at 3191 Rochambeau Avenue, Apt 4, NYC NY, USA. I recognize my blocky seven-year-old handwriting.

We went to Dahomey. We brought back seven loaves of French bread. I have real Nigerian feet.

When my sister comes in to see what I am doing I hand her the postcard.

“Real Nigerian feet?” she says after reading it.

“Don’t you remember?” I want to reminisce about how we ran on gravel to toughen our soles and dared to jump over red ant colonies we believed were deadly and kept shiny, hard-backed beetles in shoeboxes. “When we came to the States, I didn’t understand why everyone was talking about The Beatles.”

But my sister was five years old then and doesn’t remember. My brother was a toddler. “Dahomey isn’t even a country anymore,” is what she says. “Do you want to have lunch?”

I set the postcard aside. Downstairs, my brother is starting up his car. Soon I will join my sister at the kitchen table, and we will talk about what’s left to do. But first I digest what is for me a new and gut-punching logic. I have now lost both my parents. My

parents were the people who shared my earliest memories. Hence, I am in danger of losing those memories.

Which is why late that night I post a photograph to an online group called The Nigerian Nostalgia Project.

My father at thirty-six, dressed in shorts, sandals, a button-down shirt, and thick-framed glasses, his hand resting on a drum between his knees, sits in the center of what look to be a dozen teenagers. In the background are the wide leaves of a paw-paw tree. "My father recently died," I write. "He taught at the Comprehensive High School in Aiyetoro in the early 1960s."

In the morning when I log in there are 243 reactions and 34 comments. "That's Chief Ojo sitting next to your father," posts Olukemi about a round, smiling person I now recognize as an adult.

"Chief Ojo was Principal of Government College Ibadan by the time I was admitted in '73," writes Dele.

"A beautiful picture," says Joshua and dozens of others. "May your father's soul rest in peace. Please post more."

I leaf through my parents' albums and choose a photograph at which my father always paused. A young beaming couple standing in front of a school building. They wear matching outfits sewn from green and tan woven cloth. The woman is holding a newborn in her arms. Their joy is jumping off the page and into my phone and onto the Internet. "They must be teachers from the school," I write. "Does anyone know who they are?"

An hour later, Bola posts. "He was a biology teacher. The wife's father was the best friend of my late father. Her mother was my mother's best friend."

And then Akin: "She taught me English Language. Great teacher and motherly to all of us. Thanks for sharing this picture."

"I love this group," posted Folake. "Up Compro school!"

"I love everything about this photo. They are radiating," said Omoju.

Ademola settles it. "The couple is my uncle and his wife. May their souls rest in peace."

I post a picture of myself to The Nigerian Nostalgic Project. I am six or seven years old. I have pale, freckled skin and smooth, shoulder-length hair held back by a headband. I am sitting on a bench between two friends—Yemesi and Suzanne—in the one-room

school where we were taught by the then-wife of the high school guidance teacher. Behind us hang child-sized handprints on poster paper.

Bimbola comments first. "Yemisi was a lovely lady gone too soon. The only child of her parents. Her dad was our revered Principal. She was beautiful, elegant, and classy. She was a prefect and a keen sportswoman."

Adebola posts: "Yemisi of blessed memory. She was my Nigerian Law School female hostel on Igbosere Road."

Dozens more who knew Yemisi or her family post comments, and I read hungrily until the post that stops me. "I think I know you. We went to the International Elementary School together. Were you the ones with the oversized dog that used to chase us whenever we came near your house? Fond memories." Linc Ojo.

I look away from my laptop. The room spins. I have been recognized - found! - by one of the 80,000 plus members in the cyber group.

"I went to school with your brother," I type back. "I'm sorry our dog scared you. You were the Ojo boys. I remember our parents sitting together on your back porch. We ran around the yard catching fireflies in glass jars."

"Yes, I remember that too," he wrote.

My eyes tear. What does it mean that a chief's son from another continent and I share memories of firefly nights and a barking dog? Because suddenly, for the first time since my father died, I am crying, letting loose noisy sobs, and taking in deep breaths.

Over the next weeks, The Nigeria Nostalgia Project was both too much and not enough. I stay away. I log on. I like and heart and comment back.

From the back of my mother's closet I haul out a large basket. Inside are bolts of fabric, each one a revelation: blue batik, red and gold woven panels, and swatches of vividly patterned cotton. I unfold a large remnant that matches the matching outfits the joyous new parents in the photo are wearing. Deeper in the basket I find two child-sized dresses. Coral and white tie-dye with a ruffle at the bottom. I splay them on the bed and snap a photo with my phone. I upload the image and beside it I upload an old photo of my sister and me standing barefoot on a sandy beach and wearing those exact same dresses. They fit perfectly. Our arms hang loose at our sides. My sister is behind me, her curly hair windblown. In the distance, beyond a bend in the water, some tall buildings.

“That’s Three Cowry creek in Lagos,” writes Ayo. “It’s all changed now but still has some fantastic beaches.”

“The take-away for me,” says Funke, “is that your Mum kept those dresses for 60 years. I have in my possession the *aso oke* ‘etu’ woven fabric belonging to my late Mum & purchased at the time she got married in 1958. The fabric is so resplendent & I wear it sometimes too.”

I am unable to post too often because the conversations go on for days and involve hundreds of people and because I inevitably end up crying. But I can’t stay away for too long. Linc posts a photo of a group of kids. “I think you are in this picture,” he says.

A girl in the picture looks like me but is not. But I can tell by the way twenty small children are lined up and wearing lace-collared dresses or sharply ironed pants that it is a birthday party. Linc didn’t remember whose.

I post a color photo of eleven teachers posing for a group shot. Ten of the eleven are men, and one cradles a baby on his lap. Four men are European and two of the Europeans wear shirts, ties, and close-fitting blazers. The other two are dressed in flowing, wide-sleeved agbada. “The first cohort of teachers at the school,” I write. “The white guy on the far right in Nigerian garb is my father.”

Instantly, my computer rings.

“Dang!” posts Shola. “Two Oyinbos blokes rocking native. Smashingly handsome fellas.”

I am still laughing when Ogunsola posts: “May God rest the souls of the departed. The Oyinbos who dressed in Yoruba culture are most recognized.”

Okayinka: “The agbada look really good on them.”

“Thanks to your dad and many like him for their service,” says Don.

“My good friend was taught by this group,” says Barbara. “He became a gynecologist.”

Tears salt my lips. I posted a group photo of my schoolmates. I am in the front row in sandals looking straight at the camera wearing shorts and sandals. Within 24 hours I was reunited with Akin, who worked in IT in the UK (“What a journey it has been and continues to be”) and his brother Folu, a physician. We wax nostalgic about the time a lizard fell from the ceiling on our teacher’s head.

And then I am crying because time travel or not I am getting back the memories I’d feared were lost with my parents: the flowing agbada, the Hi-Life music, the laughter.

A time when I was still a child taken care of by my parents and not yet the other way around. When there was no such thing as fear or loneliness.

We are faces in one another's photo albums. I think I know you. What to toss? What to keep? I am again that girl in a headband on Three Cowry beach, the sun warming my shoulders, the sand cool between my toes. The banana boats are coming in. I am looking at my father, who is standing behind the camera, his finger on the shutter.