

*Ismaila Braimah Ikhara*



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Prince Ismaila Braimah Ikhara, the Seriki Samali of Auchi, who inspired a generation of Nigerians in America to reach back and uplift the youth in their home country, died on December 19, 2020 in Oakland, California from sudden cardiac arrest. At the time of death, he was surrounded by his three sons and enveloped in the prayers of the global Nigerian community .

The son of the late Prince Braimah and Melemu Ikhara, Chief Ismaila never let his position as the youngest of 7 children necessitate taking a back seat to his siblings . Instead, from a young age, he was propelled by a desire to help bring prominence to his family, the Ikhara royal family of Auchi Kingdom. He yearned for more role models and professionals in the family, figures that could inspire young people and expand their realm of possibility. From the time of his journey to America in 1977, and through the many arcs of his life, he unwittingly became such a figure himself.

At his core, Chief was a helper. His passion was education , but he was charitable to a fault, willing to use his last dime to help someone in need and always available to counsel. Chief extended himself in ways few would do , because he found enriching the lives of others personally rewarding. "I do for others even when I know they would not do for me," he'd say. In the last days of his life, as he lay in his hospital bed, *still*, Chief answered every incoming call, offering words of advice or financial assistance where he could. Chief was, at his core, deeply good.

He was also an amiable man with a thirst for life, and his positive energy was infectious. Even facing down life's greatest travails, including grave illness, Chief would say, "Everything is in divine order." To his community of friends and acquaintances, Chief was a problem-solver and the ultimate connector, building enduring relationships across cultures, nationalities, religions and ethnic groups. Those who knew him well often remarked on how popular Chief was, both within and outside of the Nigerian community in America. He had a way of making you feel safe and content in his presence, but also like the possibilities for your own life were limitless, if only because he told you so.

For thirty years, Chief Ismaila anticipated his own death. "I'm going to die soon" he'd tell his children, even as the decades passed. At the age of 39, a mere four days after the birth of his fifth child and in his prime, Chief suffered a heart attack and underwent triple bypass surgery, the first of many ailments related to Chief's gentle heart. Facing his own mortality at an early age seemed to spur in Chief a sense of urgency -- all we have is the present moment to achieve the goals we set for ourselves. Chief rarely wasted a moment.

Empowerment of his family and community through education was principally important to Chief Ismaila, which he demonstrated throughout his life. Education, he believed, was the best legacy you could bequeath to any generation. While a secondary school teacher in Nigeria, Chief helped indigent parents navigate the high school admissions process for their children and was a vocal advocate for the right to an education for all young people. When he subsequently journeyed to America to attend college, Chief did two things: first, he demonstrated to the young people of Auchi that poverty and lack of connections were not fixed barriers to educational attainment, and second, he became the first person in the Ikhara family to obtain a college degree, graduating from Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio with a Bachelor of Science degree in Investment Management. Chief did not stop there -- he went on to attain a Master of Sciences degree in Social and Applied Economics from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and a Master of Business Administration degree from Golden Gate University in San Francisco, California. In the process of bettering himself, Chief blazed a trail for others to follow.

It was during his time as a graduate student that Chief began sponsoring the education of Nigerians in America. He started first with young members of the extended Ikharo family, helping them obtain student visas to study in the US, enrolling them in local colleges around the US, paying school fees and housing some in his small apartment (and, later, in his family home). He soon expanded his vision to include the whole of Nigeria, recognizing that, regardless of religion or tribe, the country as a whole would benefit if its populace had greater access to higher education.

Not everyone had faith in the plausibility of Chief's vision, no matter how noble. Many needed to be shown to believe, even some closest to him. Many others simply did not believe that one man could be so generous and expect nothing in return. But Chief's benevolence was not without expectation. Instead, it was part of an implied contract: as he poured his resources into others, he *hoped* they might pay it back but he *expected* that they'd pay it forward. His life was a call to action for Nigerians around the world -- true success is not attained until your resources, however scarce, have been used in the service of others.

Those closest to Chief often remarked that, if he lived for himself, he'd be a very rich man. Though he was undoubtedly enterprising -- at points, Chief operated an ice cream company, built and sustained a successful courier service and was a licensed real estate agent, a career he very much enjoyed -- Chief prioritized his greater vision for a mobilized, educated Nigerian youth over his own individual success. On May 17 1997, Chief's many decades of work to help uplift his people was formally recognized in Auchi during his investiture as the Sereki Samali ("Leader of the Youth") of Auchi Kingdom.

Chief's manner was not without controversy. Though he was loved by many and attracted followers through his enterprising and generous nature, others close to him bristled at Chief's fixation on educational achievement. He held himself and others to a standard that some found too exacting and rigid. Still, Chief largely took his criticism in stride and, by the end of his life, had offered his biggest detractors forgiveness.

Chief Ismaila was a righteous visionary, yes, but he was also a husband, a father, a man of faith and a devoted friend. Chief's aspirations were and have always been nurtured by his supportive wife, Hauwa. The two met when Chief was a charismatic 25-year-old teacher in Agenebode with big dreams of schooling in America, and Hauwa was a beautiful, vibrant go-getter in Jattu. They were friends first and above all else, and both aspired to experience a dynamic life outside of their respective villages. Over the years, Hauwa has been the stable force behind Chief and his nuclear family, his primary counsel helping propel him towards his dreams.

As a father, Chief was dogged in his emphasis on education. He shuttled his five children to school each morning, usually with the radio off to ensure that their days began with a values-based lecture. "Obedience pays, humility pays, they make you beloved to God and to man," he'd remind them each day. Never afraid to ruffle feathers, Chief was known by fellow parents and teachers to be an actively engaged member of the school community and a passionate activist for his children's academic and extracurricular success. Chief's sons marveled at and sought to replicate his keen sense of style, quiet humor and incredible determination in the face of adversity. To his daughters, Chief Ismaila was a source of great support and strength, available at all hours (in all time zones) to lend an ear to complaints, provide a piece of guiding advice, or just add levity to a bad situation with one of his many jokes or proverbs. As his five children grew into successful lawyers, activists and entrepreneurs, Chief was filled with joyful satisfaction.

The world is never ready for the loss of a giant. Though death is certain for everyone, there are some people whose lives feel bigger than those of the rest of us, whose continued presence in our lives we take as inevitable. Chief was the pillar of the Ikharo family, a revered leader of the Nigerian community at home and abroad, a testament to the power of selfless generosity to uplift communities and inspire generations to follow. He was, as his friends will tell you, one of one.

In the end, though, we all become stories. Our legacy lives on through the memories shared with those we leave behind, and the lasting marks we make in the hearts of others. The story of Chief Ismaila's life will endure so long as those he touched keep his memory alive. So many plans were left unfinished, but that simply means there is more work for the rest of us to do. The Auchu community, the whole of Nigeria... it is time to get to work and determine how we can use our lives and our resources to empower others.

The legacy of a generous, deeply caring and impactful soul like Chief's never dies, and in that his many friends and followers can take solace. As the poet Rumi wrote, "goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul, there is no such thing as separation." And so, instead of goodbye we say Rest Well, Chief. And thank you.

