SHEHU MUSA YAR’ADUA
Neither North nor South, East nor West; One Nigeria

Written by
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Shehu Musa Yar'Adua was born on March 5, 1943 in Katsina. At the time of his birth, Nigeria was part of the British Empire. During his lifetime he witnessed many important changes in Nigeria's history.
When little Shehu was two years old, he was sent to live with his grandmother, Hajia Aisha. As Hajia Aisha slept that first night, she dreamed that Shehu was taken away. Shehu's grandmother was very sad. She did not know how to tell his parents what had happened to him.

Then Hajia Aisha saw little Shehu returning before the morning prayer. He was riding a white horse and wearing a white gown and a large turban. She was told Shehu had been taken to prepare him for the special role he would play in their lives.
Shehu was a bright boy. He did his best to learn his school lessons, though he sometimes struggled. He also learned about God and that in Nigeria people practiced different religions. His parents were very proud of their son. He was a kind boy and took good care of his brothers and sisters.
Shehu had many friends and liked to play sports. He especially liked to play football and hockey. In secondary school he became a very good debater and won many prizes for his class.
By the time Shehu graduated from secondary school Nigeria had gained independence from Britain. His father, Musa Yar'Adua was a member of the House of Representatives and Minister in the First Republic. Though the young Shehu wanted to study law his father encouraged him to enter the Military. He joined the Army and was later sent to England to receive training at Sandhurst, a fine military academy.
Shehu found London cold and a little lonely. He was anxious to return home. As he was preparing to leave Sandhurst, one of his trainers wished him good luck but warned him to take care: “You are either going to be killed in battle or become a general at a very young age.”
Upon his return from England Shehu decided to marry. He chose a very pretty girl called Binta Yan'Mata. She was to prove a steady and loyal companion, who endured many trials as Shehu rose in his career.
They were to have five children together: Asiya, Murtala, Buhari, Ahmed and Aminu. Later on he had four more children, Ibrahim, Maryam, Tukur and Hannatu.

As Shehu was settling into family life, tension across the country began to grow. Some Nigerians decided they did not want to live with other Nigerians.
Shehu was by then a Lieutenant serving in Enugu. He wanted the country to remain united. But despite his wishes war broke out. Shehu led his troops in many battles, including the capture of Onitsha. He fought bravely and helped to win the war to save Nigeria.
By the time the war ended in 1970, more than one million people had died. Entire communities in the East were devastated. People faced severe hunger and starvation while the war lasted.
After the war, the Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, said that everyone must forgive each other. People were encouraged to embrace peace. No victor, no vanquished was declared by the federal government to heal emotional wounds inflicted by a war among brothers.
But the military that had ruled Nigeria during the war did not want to hold elections. Shehu believed that people should have the right to rule themselves in a democratic system. He helped bring about a change in government with a new head of state. General Murtala Mohammed set the date for the military to hand over power on October 1, 1979. Sadly he was assassinated before that could happen.
General Olusegun Obasanjo became head of state and General Yar’Adua was chosen as his deputy. Under their leadership many roads and bridges were constructed. They built ports for shipping and fertiliser factories so the country would have enough food to feed everyone. They also helped their African brothers and sisters in faraway countries such as South Africa who were not yet free. The world was very proud of Nigeria.
Shehu was just 33 years old when he was promoted to Major General in the Army. This made him then the youngest general ever in Africa. The prediction of his trainers at Sandhurst had proved true.

But the government of Generals Obasanjo and Yar’Adua knew that the country longed for democracy. They were determined to uphold the date set by late Murtala Mohammed to hand over power. They helped to write a new constitution for the country. Elections were held and Shehu Shagari was elected president. Obasanjo and Yar’Adua retired from government. This was historic as no military leader in Africa had ever willingly stepped down from office.
Shehu began to live quietly in Kaduna, the old northern capital. He was happy to spend more time with his family. He started many businesses and helped to build the National Mosque in Abuja. Because of all the things Shehu had done to serve God and Nigeria, the people of Katsina were very proud. They wanted to honour him so they made him Tafidan Katsina. He wore a white gown and a large turban at the ceremony just like in his grandmother's dream.
Not long after, the civilian government of President Shagari ran into trouble. A group of military officers took over the government by force. General Buhari was named Head of State.

General Buhari’s reign did not last long as yet another group of soldiers took power in a coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida.
Shehu was convinced that to save Nigeria she must return to
democratic rule led by the people. He worked with politicians
from all over the country to form a national party. They
admired him and wanted him to be their president. Shehu
became known as a bridge builder.

He strongly believed that the country should be for all
Nigerians, no matter what ethnic or religious group they
belonged to. His campaign slogan was “Neither North nor
South, East nor West, One Nigeria.”
Shehu Yar’Adua won the primary elections for his party. But
the military did not want him to be President. They cancelled
the elections and banned him from politics.
Shehu refused to give up. He supported Chief M.K.O Abiola as his party’s presidential candidate. In June 1993, Chief Abiola won the presidential election. But the military annulled that election too. They wanted to cling to power at all cost.
Protests and strikes in parts of the country forced the military to hand over power to an interim government. But that government was soon overthrown by a military strong man, General Sani Abacha. He was a dictator who ruled by fear and intimidation and Nigerians were very much afraid of him. It was a very dark hour in the nation's history.

Shehu challenged the ruler in public, demanding that people should be allowed to decide who their leaders were. For daring to stand up for the people Shehu was arrested and sent to Kirikiri Prison.
General Obasanjo tried to help his friend, but he too was arrested. Many other good Nigerians who opposed the regime were also incarcerated until the prisons were overflowing. A cloud of darkness fell over the country. An environmental activist and writer named Ken Saro Wiwa who led a movement demanding better rights for the Ogoni people, was executed. Sanctions were imposed against the country. Nigeria became diplomatically isolated.
Shehu's family and friends were very worried about him. Conditions in the prison were bad. He suffered from many colds and malaria.
But Shehu had a deep faith in God. He was not concerned about himself. He was only concerned for the country. He wrote a letter from the prison that said, "Please don't worry too much about me. It is the sacrifice some of us must make for our country to be free."
In prison, he read many books and listened to the radio. He thought about how much he would try to help Nigeria when he was free.
Abacha feared that Shehu Yar’Adua stood in the way of his retaining power and decided he would not leave the prison alive. Sadly, Shehu died on December 8, 1997 in Abakaliki Prison, Ebonyi State. His body was taken to Katsina where he was buried in a place of high honour. Thousands of people carried his coffin high on their shoulders and prayed for God to have mercy on his soul.
Soon after, Abacha died. General Abdulsalami Abubakar became head of state and announced a transition to civil rule. In 1999, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president and Yar'Adua's political associate, Atiku Abubakar, was elected Vice President. They served for two four-year terms.
In 2007, Umaru Yar'Adua, Shehu's younger brother and former governor of Katsina State, succeeded Obasanjo. He fulfilled his brother's dream of becoming President, but he died less than three years later.
The country united behind Vice President Goodluck Jonathan who stepped in to complete the term of office. In 2011 President Jonathan was elected in his own right. Nigeria celebrated its Golden Jubilee on October 1, 2010, a milestone in the nation's history.
Shehu Musa Yar’Adua gave his life for the freedom and dignity of all Nigerians. We will remember him for his courage, simplicity and love for his country. He was an honourable man.