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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Simon Ezevuo Onwu: *Pioneer Indigenous Medical Doctor of Eastern Nigeria*

By Maduagwu Nzubechi

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DR. SIMON EZEVUO ONWU

Dr. Simon Ezevuo Onwu: Pioneer Indigenous Medical Doctor of Eastern Nigeria

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The return of Dr. Simon Ezevuo Onwu to Eastern Nigeria stood as a defining chapter in ambition of a lot of igbos who wanted to be medical doctors and professionals. Revered as the first Western-trained medical doctor from Alaigbo and in Eastern Nigeria as a whole, his journey symbolizes resilience, intellectual brilliance, and service during a time when such achievements were extraordinarily rare. Born on December 28, 1908, in Affa, Dr. Onwu rose from humble beginnings to become a trailblazer in medicine, public service, and cultural development.

Early Life and Education

Dr. Simon Ezevuo Onwu was born into the family of Chief Amadi Onwubunta and Madam Nwalute Onwubunta on 28th December 1908 in Affa in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu state under colonial Nigeria, a period marked by limited access to advanced education, particularly in Igboland. From an early age, he displayed an exceptional thirst for knowledge and determination to excel.

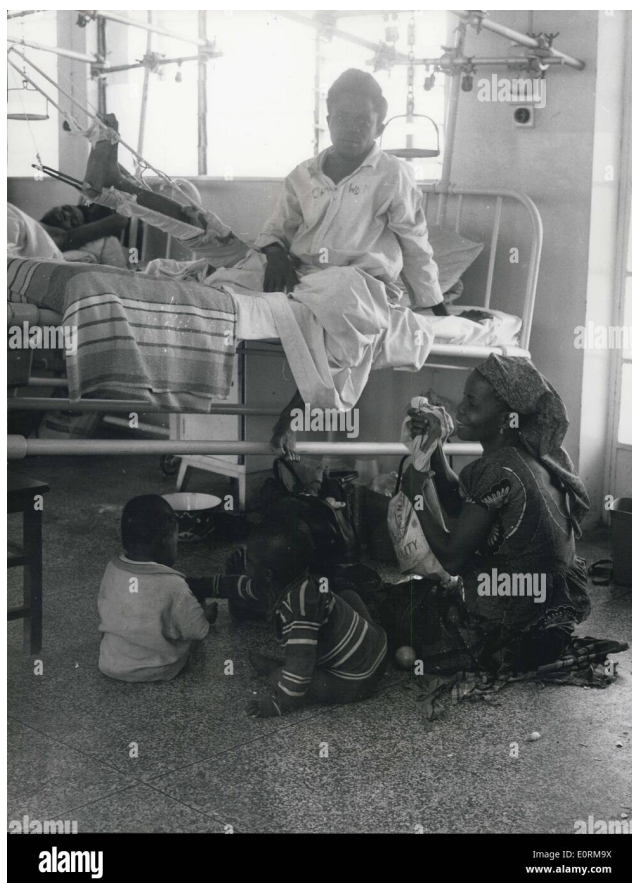
In 1925, he traveled to the United Kingdom in pursuit of formal education. By 1927, he had obtained the London Matriculation Certificate, a critical academic milestone that paved the way for higher studies. That same year, he gained admission into the prestigious University of Edinburgh Medical School, where he excelled further.

In July 1932, he earned his degrees in Bachelor of Medicine (MB) and

Bachelor of Surgery (ChB), becoming the first Igbo—and indeed the first individual from Eastern Nigeria—to qualify as a Western-trained medical doctor. He further advanced his expertise with:

- A Diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene from the University of Liverpool
- A Licentiate in Midwifery from Coombe Hospital

During his studies, he received prestigious academic awards, including the Robert Wilson Memorial Prize in Chemistry and the Welcome Prize in Medicine, underscoring his exceptional intellect.



Jan 1, 1960 – Biafra Enugu Hospital – Eastern Nigeria A patient being visited by his wife and children

Upon returning to Nigeria in 1933, Dr. Onwu committed himself to improving healthcare across the Eastern Region. At a time when medical infrastructure was still developing, his contributions were both pioneering and transformative.

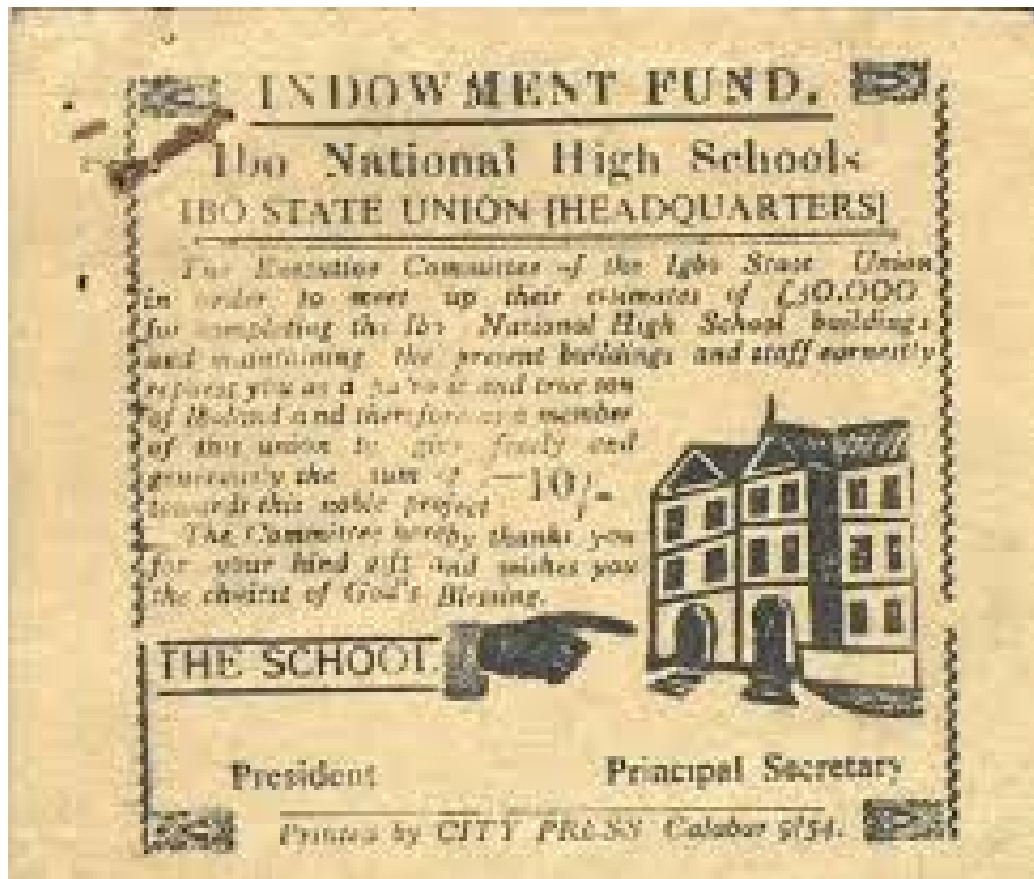
His most notable achievement came in 1957, when he was appointed

the first African Director of Medical Services for Eastern Nigeria. In this role—held alongside his position as Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health until 1963—he oversaw:

- Healthcare policy and administration
- Expansion of medical facilities
- Public health programs and disease control
- Budgeting and operational management

His leadership played a crucial role in shaping the healthcare system during Nigeria's transition from colonial rule to self-governance, especially in tackling ravaging illnesses like leprosy that decimated a lot of people in eastern Nigeria.

Beyond medicine, Dr. Onwu made enduring contributions to Igbo culture and identity. His prominence inspired a new wave of educational ambition among the Igbo people and contributed to the growth of the Igbo Union, which promoted unity and political consciousness. His impact was felt to the point that it is on record that the first time the Igbos of portharcourt took cognizance of their singular identity as igbo people was at the welcome reception of Dr Simon on his return to Nigeria which kicked of the formation of the Igbo union across other provinces.



Endowment Fund. Ibo National High Schools. Ibo State Union Headquarters. 1954

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National and International Recognition

Dr. Onwu's excellence and service earned him several distinguished honours both locally and internationally:

- Coronation Medal (1953)
- Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), conferred by Queen Elizabeth II in 1954
- Membership in the Royal Vatican Order, alongside a Papal Scroll (1956)

These recognitions reflected his impact not only in medicine but also in humanitarian and administrative service.

Final Years and Passing

Dr. Simon Ezevuo Onwu passed away on June 4, 1969, at St Bartholomew's Hospital in Britain, at the age of 60. His death occurred during the tragic period of the Nigerian Civil War, a time of immense upheaval in Eastern Nigeria. He passed on due to a protracted illness.

He remains an enduring symbol of excellence, proving that even in times of limitation, vision and determination can create a legacy that transcends generations



St Bartholomew's Hospital

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nzubechi is a history, political enthusiast who dabbles into social commentary once in a while



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