

PERSPECTIVE

The London Property that Exposes Nigeria's Rot

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A quiet house at 79 Randall Avenue, North London, has become the unlikely centerpiece of one of the most extraordinary property fraud cases ever to involve two of Nigeria's most prominent figures: the late General Jeremiah Useni and Chief Mike Ozekhome, SAN.

That Nigerian politicians are corrupt is no news to anyone. What is remarkable is how their corruption is facilitated, even legitimized, by senior members of the Nigerian Bar in foreign courts. The case, decided in early September 2024 by the UK's First-tier Tribunal (Property Chamber), revealed how this property – purchased in 1993 at the height of General Sani Abacha's regime – was registered under the false name "Tali Shani."

Decades later, the tribunal uncovered how this phantom identity was used to conceal Useni's ownership and later became the basis of a failed attempt to pass the house to Chief Ozekhome. What emerged was a shocking tale of forgery, fabricated identities, and collusion between Nigeria's political and legal elites.

Forged Identities and Fabricated Claims

The tribunal was tasked with resolving competing claims. On one side stood "Mr. Tali Shani," produced by Chief Ozekhome as the supposed registered owner who had transferred the property to him in 2021. On the other was "Ms. Tali Shani," presented by Nigerian law firm Edewor & Co. through their London agent, solicitor Kingsley Efemuai, who opposed the transfer. The stories quickly unraveled.

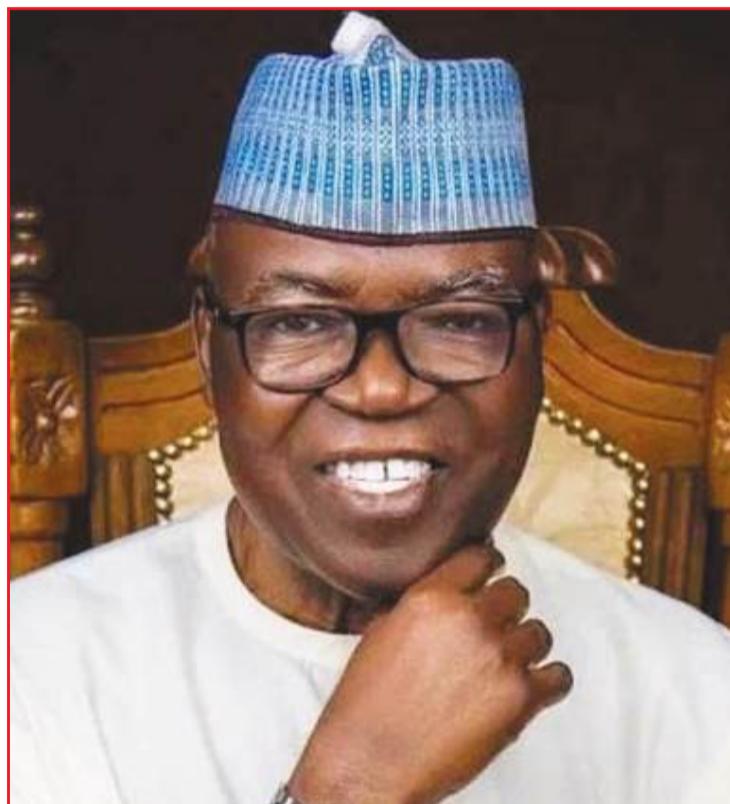
"Mr. Tali Shani" told the tribunal he bought the London house in 1993 at just 20 years old, using profits from selling sweets, mangoes, and cattle in Nigeria. He claimed he then appointed General Jeremiah Useni – then a powerful FCT Minister – as his property manager. The idea of a herdsman hiring a sitting general as property manager would be comical, if not absurd.

But "Ms. Tali Shani" was even more fantastical. Although she was the applicant in the matter, she never appeared throughout the proceeding. Her legal team submitted a raft of fraudulent documents: a forged Nigerian National Identification Number (NIN) slip that was created in Monaco, through an online loophole, a fake mobile phone bill later traced back to her lawyer Mohammed Edewor himself, and even a death certificate riddled with contradictions. When pressed on her absence from the proceedings, her lawyers first claimed she was gravely ill, then announced her sudden death in 2024, filing documents so sloppy they included a Sunday funeral scheduled on the wrong date.

Two men appeared as her supposed "son" and "cousin". Their accounts contradicted each other and collapsed under questioning. When asked about picture of Ms. Shani's funeral, one of the witnesses claimed the funeral photographer was "killed by bandits" immediately after the funeral.

But what was shocking at the end of the matter was that Ms. Shani never existed. She was the creation of some lawyer from the Nigeria law firm of Edewor & Co. Her legal team in Nigeria (Edewor & Co) and their London counterpart, Kingsley Efemuai, a London-based solicitor, submitted a bundle of fake documents to the tribunal in proof of her existence. When the charade unravelled under scrutiny, Mr. Efemuai abruptly withdrew from the case, leaving behind a trail of professional embarrassment.

Although an individual presented himself with a Nigerian passport in the name of "Mr. Tali Shani," he had no connection to the 1993 purchase. This is



Late Useni



Ozekhome

because "Tali Shani" was, in fact, an alias for General Useni. It remains baffling how another individual could assume that name, acquire a Nigerian passport, and then seek to transfer the property to Chief Ozekhome – a senior lawyer who could hardly claim ignorance of such a comical sham. In the end, the claims of both Mr. and Ms. Tali Shani collapsed under scrutiny, exposing the case as a fraud built on identity theft and deception.

General Useni's Hidden Purchase

With the phantom claims dismantled, attention shifted to General Useni. Testifying by video link in 2024, shortly before his death, the 81-year-old admitted bluntly: he had bought the property in 1993 and had registered it under the false name "Tali Shani."

This was not an isolated deception. In 2022, the Royal Court of Jersey forfeited £1.9 million from accounts Useni had opened under the alias "Tim Shani." He insisted it was merely a "coded password name," but the Jersey court dismissed the excuse, noting that he obviously used the name to conceal stolen funds.

The London tribunal drew the obvious parallel: the coincidence of "Tim Shani" and "Tali Shani" was no accident. Useni had a pattern of laundering funds under false "Shani" names. The judge concluded this was a layered disguise designed to keep Useni's name off official records.

Chief Ozekhome's Questionable Acquisition

The role of Chief Ozekhome, one of Nigeria's most high-profile lawyers, is perhaps the most troubling. In 2021, he applied to register the house in his own name, claiming it had been transferred to him by "Mr. Tali Shani." He described the transaction as a gift from a grateful client, supposedly worth over £500,000 in unpaid legal services.

Under scrutiny, this story crumbled. Ozekhome's explanations shifted repeatedly as his

credibility crumbled: at times he said there was monetary consideration, then insisted it was a pure gift, then suggested it was payment in kind, and at one point implied another property had been given in exchange. No documentary evidence of any legal services from Ozekhome to Mr. Shani was ever produced. When pressed to cite even one case he supposedly handled for Shani, Chief Ozekhome invoked "client confidentiality."

The tribunal dismissed his account as 'contrived and invented.' Evidence showed that Ozekhome had been managing the property since at least 2019, holding a power of attorney from "Mr. Shani" and collecting rent on Useni's behalf. Judge Paton concluded the 2021 transfer was orchestrated by Useni, and that Ozekhome's shifting stories were fabrications designed to legitimise a fraudulent transaction.

The tribunal ruled that since "Mr. Tali Shani" had no legitimate title, he could not convey the property. It ordered the Land Registrar to cancel Ozekhome's registration application.

Legal Limbo and Systemic Rot

The ruling left the 79 Randall Avenue property in legal limbo. On paper, it remains registered to "Tali Shani," a fictitious name. In reality, it belonged to Gen. Useni, now deceased. With the phantom owner never real, the property has no valid claimant. It may ultimately revert to the British Crown as unclaimed property.

For Nigeria, however, the implications are deeper. This case illustrates how corruption operates: politicians hide wealth abroad under false identities, while lawyers – sworn to uphold the law – serve as enablers of fraud. Useni's conduct was part of a familiar pattern among Nigeria's elite, where public office is treated as a platform for personal enrichment.

More disturbing is the role of the legal profession. From Nigerian lawyers at Edewor & Co. who fabricated a person that never existed, to UK-based solicitor Kingsley Efemuai who blindly pursued the case of a non-existent client – feeding the tribunal with fraudulent documents, to Chief Ozekhome himself, the case demonstrated how Nigerian lawyers have become the midwives of fraud and corruption in the system. Without their active participation, the country would

never have been so embarrassed at this London tribunal.

The tribunal also highlighted failures in Nigeria's own institutions. Fake NIN slips, forged death certificates, and bogus court orders were produced with apparent ease, suggesting weak oversight and impunity at home. That it took a British court to unravel the fraud is an indictment of Nigeria's regulatory and justice systems.

Accountability and the Nigerian Bar

In societies with strong law practice regulatory oversight, lawyers like these would already be under investigation by their professional bodies. In Nigeria, one must ask whether the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Committee will summon the courage to investigate, let alone sanction, such misconduct.

This is not merely about one house in London. It is about the integrity of Nigeria's legal system and the willingness of the Bar to hold its members accountable. When senior advocates participate in – or turn a blind eye to – obvious fraud, they erode public confidence in the very profession meant to safeguard justice.

Conclusion

The saga of 79 Randall Avenue is more than a property dispute. It is a case study in the anatomy of corruption, exposing how political power and legal expertise intertwine to hide stolen wealth. A British judge, unencumbered by local politics, was able to trace the lies, cut through the forgeries, and prevent a fraudulent transfer.

Neither the fictitious claimant "Ms. Tali Shani" nor the Senior Advocate Respondent Chief Ozekhome got what they wanted. The property remains in limbo. But for Nigerians, the lesson is clear: until the powerful are held accountable at home, and until lawyers who enable corruption face discipline, the cycle will continue.

A modest house in North London has become a mirror reflecting Nigeria's deeper rot – where politicians launder public wealth, lawyers provide the cover, and justice emerges only in foreign courts.

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