

EDUCATION, YOUTH AGENCY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lecture Delivered at the Bisi Ogunjobi Foundation Youth Programme

Ikeja, Lagos

14 February 2014

By

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Your Excellency, Your Royal Majesties, The Chairman, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, CFR, CON, President of the Bisi Ogunjobi Foundation, Chair and Members of the Board of Trustees, My Lords Spiritual and Temporal, Honorees, Gentlemen of the Press, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Introduction

I thank Elder Bisi Ogunjobi, OON, the Founder of The Bisi Ogunjobi Foundation, and Professor G.O. Alegbeleye, the Chair of the Board of Trustees, for inviting me to address this distinguished audience on the occasion of the presentation of a book, *Sharing Knowledge for Youth Empowerment and National Development*, the 2013/14 scholarship awards and reunion of recipients of scholarships awarded by the Foundation. However, this is a labour of love, as my wife, Barr. Abosede Omowumi Olukoju, JP, is an Olorunda from Ilepa, Ikare, the hometown of Elder Ogundipe.

That said, permit me to join the past and current beneficiaries of Elder Ogunjobi's benevolence in thanking and congratulating him on these landmark achievements. I also commend the noble initiative – driven by altruism and Christian charity – that brought all of this into being. As we acknowledge the kindness of the givers, we also seize the moment to challenge the recipients of the scholarships to make the best use of the golden opportunity that the scheme has afforded them.

What is striking about the focus and impact of the Foundation is the investment in education for the empowerment of otherwise disadvantaged youth, a critical element of the country's population. The Biblical admonition to “train a child the way he should go, and afterwards he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6) applies here. But then, this task is not the exclusive responsibility of children's biological parents. As the Yoruba axiom says, though a child has a set of biological parents, s/he is the ward of the entire community. This implies that God and the society expect us to share and bear burdens, which is what the Bisi Ogunjobi Foundation has been doing for a long while with remarkable results that we are celebrating today. Truly, the **Bisi Ogunjobi Foundation** has been **busy** pursuing a noble cause.

Accordingly, I shall speak briefly on “Education, Youth Agency and National Development.” But, first, permit me to clarify some key concepts and propose some working definitions in the Nigerian context.

Youth, Agency and Change

I prefer to define “youth” essentially on the basis of chronological age, as anyone below 40 years of age. Within this broad category are diverse categories of youth according to age, social class, cultural background, faith and ideological persuasion. The point is that “youth” is not a homogeneous category. It has to be employed contextually in changing circumstances.

Agency is a concept that implies involvement, engagement, dynamism or activism as opposed to passivity, stagnation, docility and acquiescence. Indeed, agency is the key dynamic of change. It entails individual and corporate initiative springing from within, even if triggered by external stimuli, either positive or otherwise. Accordingly, positive agency is proactive rather than reactive. It challenges the status quo, questions received wisdom, seeks new ways of doing things and changing the situation for the better.

Change itself is also problematic for it could be positive or negative; it could be superficial or fundamental, ephemeral or lasting. Indeed, it could be more apparent than real; a mask for decay or retrogression. Change for some people might amount to motion without progress, what Hugh Trevor-Roper, a racist British Professor – who denied that Africa had a history worth studying – dismissively described as the “endless gyrations of barbarous tribes.”

In effect, our focus is positive or progressive change, one that is purposeful, edifying and developmental, that benefits the greatest number of people at any given time. This change might be disruptive in the short term, especially as the average person dreads the unknown that change represents, and as people have to pay a price to learn to adjust to new ways. Such changes are cumulative, building on a series of positive developments. They could throw up new personalities, ideas, structures and organizations. Positive, structural change, a euphemism for Development, ushers in a better dispensation but it comes with a price tag –sacrifice, uncertainty or inconvenience at some point.

A thread that ties binds the related themes of youth capacity, agency and change is education, both formal and otherwise. We need to spare a few moments to reflect on this inter-relationship and its implications for national development in the Nigerian and comparative contexts.

Education, Human Capacity Development and National Development

The role of formal and non-formal education in developing human capacity for self- and societal development is well known. It is an axiom that no country can develop beyond the capacity of its people to acquire and deploy skills required in various sectors of the economy. Every community depends on the vocational, industrial, commercial and sundry enterprise of its people. Nigerian history amply illustrates how the anti-colonial movement benefited from the exertions of the educated elite who founded newspapers, wrote petitions, organized workers, mobilized the people and formed political organizations that ventilated the grievances of the colonial subjects. Across Africa and Asia, nationalist movements were led by persons with a reasonable standard of formal education. Indeed most were University-trained persons or accomplished professionals – lawyers, journalists, medical doctors or teachers. The likes of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Chief Anthony Enahoro in Nigeria, Dr Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (then known as Tanganyika), Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana (previously, the Gold Coast) and Mahatma Gandhi of India exemplify this assertion. It is important to stress that practically all of these leaders achieved prominence well before attaining the age of forty.

Even as independence was being won, social, economic and political progress was achieved as the school enrolment, rate of skill acquisition, number of institutions and instructors, and the quantum of facilities and funding increased. In Western Nigeria, for example, the unprecedented access to formal education afforded by the Free Primary Education Scheme of the 1950s is generally regarded as pivotal to the region's consistent pace-setting achievements driven by an enlightened and mobilized citizenry empowered through mass education and the media. The point is that education enlightens and empowers, and makes for easy mobilization for progress. It is a moot point, of course, whether the momentum of development and the quality of education of the late colonial and early post-independence period have been sustained in the face of the vagaries of divisive national politics, turbulent educational policies and inadequate funding.

Before we comment further, permit me to illustrate how a particular country achieved greatness through the systematic development of its human capital.

Until the recent rise of China, Japan was the second leading economic power in the world. But, before January 3, 1868, it was a backward feudal country that was at the risk of China-type Western domination. But from that day, when a group of young warriors, the *samurai*, seized power and launched the Meiji Revolution, the country began a steep ascent that took it to regional supremacy within 27 years. This was after defeating China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. It attained global reckoning following its victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Though a combination of nationalistic leadership, multi-sectoral policy changes, strategic planning, military and economic reforms accounted for the meteoric rise of Japan, educational reforms and mass education also played a central role. Investment in literary, commercial and technical education, engagement of foreign experts for an initial period of tutelage, overseas study tours and award of scholarships combined to produce a literacy rate of about 90 per cent by 1900. Lacking the variety and quantum of natural resources that aided the rise of the United States and other Western powers, Japan developed its most important resource, human capital, with results that became apparent within a generation of the Meiji Revolution. We may note that those who drove the revolutionary changes were youth, the oldest of whom, Tomomi Iwakuri, was a mere 43 years old.

From the foregoing, we can see how youth were at the vanguard of change and how educational reforms, leading to high literacy rates, transformed Japanese society in one generation. This poses a challenge to Nigeria, the record of which we examine next.

Nigeria: The Crisis of the Education Sector and Implications for Youth and National Development

In Nigeria, a country that lacks precise statistics, it is not easy to make firm declarations or reliable projections. Yet, it is apparent that after half a century of independence, literacy rates in Nigeria are well below 50 percent of the population. This suggests that stakeholders, especially the government, do not appear to have realized the role of human capital in national development. I do not claim to be an expert in curriculum planning and development like our BOT Chair, Professor Alegbeleye. But having taught at the primary, secondary and tertiary

school levels at various times since 1974, I can make some assertions based on lived experience. Keen observers too must have noted the dereliction of duty on the part of various stakeholders, especially the government. Since education is a social good and one of the primary responsibilities of government (across the tiers), the State must be held responsible for inadequacies in the funding of education, training of teachers, creation of a conducive environment for learning, supply of appropriate equipment and facilities, quality control and promotion of excellence in the education sector, and celebration of dignity of labour among workers in the sector, that is, the teachers.

Consequently, the following features - demoralized workforce, dilapidated infrastructure, disoriented learners, apathetic society, turbulent curricula and policy somersaults - have become signposts of the lingering crisis in the Nigerian education sector at all levels. One may contrast the situation in Nigeria with that of the United Kingdom in one critical area – the quality of teachers. A recent report states that there had been an unprecedented rise in the recruitment of university graduates with First or Second Class Upper honours degrees into the teaching profession in the UK. Two-thirds of trainee teachers there had obtained First or Second Class Upper degrees in 2011-12. The development was applauded by an official who stated that: “Children deserve excellent teachers and ... [the latest] statistics show (that) the profession is attracting more of the country’s top-tier graduates.” (*The Punch*, 12 November 2013, p.58) This contrasts with Nigeria, where top-grade graduates shun teaching for several reasons, not least poor working conditions. As we speak, public universities have just resumed from an avoidable four-month forced recess –forfeiting one third of a calendar year – over unresolved contractual issues. As an aside, while those universities are scrambling to complete the second semester of the previous academic session, private universities, such as Caleb University, are completing the first semester of the current session!

Symptoms, such as the poor reading habit and negative attitude to learning by students, examination misconduct, demonstrable (though uneven) fall in certain standards, have been mistaken for the cause(s) of the crisis. In a nutshell, Nigerian youth have neither been given a fair deal nor been properly equipped for their leadership role as change agents in society. The disruption of the school calendar, poor funding of education, poor reward for honest endeavour

in a political economy dominated by the worship of money (no matter by what means it was acquired) and erosion of time-honoured values have conspired to traumatize the youth of this generation. Consequently, the Nigerian society needs to re-examine its values and strive to raise empowered youth to embrace the mother tongue and study the history of Nigerian peoples to give them proper grounding in their country's diverse cultures. Such moral and cultural grounding makes for self-assertion and confidence in a world in which two concurrent but contradictory processes are at play: relentless globalisation is homogenizing culture on the one hand, while unyielding nationalism is perpetuating diversity, on the other.

The neglect of public schools, the loss of interest in teaching by the best and most competent, and the consequent recruitment of the available but not so committed or competent, naturally produced generations of problematic school leavers, mainly from low-income families. The latter often lack the literary capability to get into higher institutions, are denied the technical skills for the job market, and did not quite master a trade before venturing into the professions. The point is that our society scorns vocational education and dignity of labour. Worse still, severe shortfalls in the supply of water and electricity cripple micro and small scale enterprises which employ artisans. The Nigerian condition contrasts sharply with the situation in the United Kingdom, our former colonial master. A recent poll of 1,000 employers in the UK revealed that 72 per cent of them considered vocational education as "essential for preparing young people for work." (*The Punch*, 12 November 2013, p.58) The odds are thus stacked against Nigerian youth of humble origins. Their quest for education as a liberating tool invariably runs into the brickwall of poverty, and they might not make much headway without the intervention of committed non-governmental agencies, such as the Bisi Ogunjobi Foundation.

That said, the youth themselves need to take responsibility, by exercising initiative in overcoming societal and other constraints which hamper their potential as change agents. But, before considering youth agency through self-development, we shall comment on societal constraints on youth agency.

Societal Constraints on Youth Agency for Positive Change

It can be argued that citizens in general and youth in particular are the products of their society, its systems and processes of socialization. To that extent, societal norms and mores play a critical

role in either constraining or unleashing the potential of youth. On the one hand, the formal school systems and curricula could develop or hamstring youth development. On the other, informal socialization could exert even a greater influence either way. Hence, while we may criticize the changing school curricula and other inadequacies, we should look at societal practices which informally limit the potential of Nigerian youth as leaders and change agents. A stifling socio-cultural, economic and political milieu will constrict the space for creativity and self-expression. The following are some of the striking societal constraints:

- False consciousness – conscription of youth into atavistic primordial politics; appeal to religious bigotry and ethnic particularism; deployment of youth as shock troopers or hired guns; promoting youth violence fuelled by drugs and material reward
- Longstanding societal apathy; a defeatist attitude – that change is not possible or is too costly
- Prevalence of bad leadership; scarcity of good role models and/or preference for dubious/flawed heroes
- Progressive decline in public morality and overall societal standards
- Get-rich-quick mentality with less stress on honest endeavour and more on chance, luck, short-cuts, etc
- Culture of impunity, nepotism, favouritism; miscarriage of justice
- The baneful effect of personality cults, built around “successful”, rich, powerful and influential individuals with perverse values
- Poor reward or lack of motivation for excellence – promotion of mediocrity

That said, the youth too should take responsibility for their current plight. They are not altogether victims, given the free moral agency that God has endowed every human being with. Let us now comment on a few areas where Nigerian youth themselves need to take responsibility and make rational choices.

Taking Responsibility: Tackling Pitfalls of Youth Culture

In this age of globalization, youth all over the world share certain characteristics. The increasing homogenization of youth culture is largely a product of greater mobility across national and socio-cultural frontiers, the massive increase in access to electronic media and information and communication technology, most especially social media such as Facebook. So engrossed or addicted are most youth to social media that someone advised Nigerian youth to get off Facebook and face their books! Let us comment on a few examples of misplaced priority by the youth of this generation.

- Uncritical adoption of negative foreign influences – dress and hair styles, slangs, etc.
- Fawning adulation of flawed foreign and local role models (talented but morally bankrupt show business or sports stars)
- Disconnect or alienation from national cultural values; for example, scant respect for or interest in indigenous languages and history, monuments and emblems, such as the national anthem, the flag and national heroes.
- Preoccupation with the flimsy and ephemeral, fun and fantasy; the peril of drug abuse, glorification of immoral gratification
- Abuse of social media and ICT to defraud or commit violent crimes – rape, bullying, abduction, murder, etc.
- Poor reading habits, lack of intellectual curiosity and declining emphasis on academic rigour, competition and excellence
- Examination misconduct, cultism and vandalism; violence and anti-social behaviour
- The herd instinct – peer pressure and culture of conformity (“blending”), which amounts to moral cowardice

Having highlighted the roles of the society at large and the individual youth, we now propose how youth can transcend societal or systemic and individual constraints that we have

highlighted. The suggestions, like the issues raised above, are not exhaustive but are mere pointers to possibilities of youth empowerment for leadership and societal change.

Transforming Nigerian Youth into Agents for Positive Change

- Recognize that not every change is positive or beneficial – opt for peaceful, positive change; be committed to resolving, not escalating, conflicts
- Accept that youth have a critical role to play in creating a better world
- Exercise personal initiative to shun youthful excesses – drugs, indulgence, violence
- Dare to be different; be a role model yourself – avoid the herd instinct; do not join the multitude to do evil; promote moral self-policing against anti-social behaviour (e.g. vandalism of public facilities); uphold edifying values and virtues
- Educate and develop yourself through wide-ranging and diligent study, deep reflection and learning new ways of doing things better; acquire new skills to tackle emerging challenges or exploit fresh opportunities
- Be creative visionaries; follow your heart and your positive dreams;
- Think big; think and act beyond narrow self-interest; envision the desired positive change and identify how you fit into achieving it; be part of the solution, not the problem
- Be strategic; focus on the long term – do not live for the moment; recognize that though youth are stated to be leaders of tomorrow, the future starts from NOW! Resolve to be part of that future now
- Understand that to play leadership roles, youth must learn to be good followers, but not uncritical ones, in the first instance
- Have strong, positive role models and mentors to walk you through
- Develop a positive mindset – a “can-do” spirit [the Caleb Spirit]; have an inquiring mind but not a cynical attitude
- Focus on civic engagement with your society (a perfect antidote to alienation) – identify with it and its challenges, and confer with like minds on how to surmount them; be rooted and grounded in your country’s cultural values – you cannot make a difference if you are socio-culturally rootless; develop civic pride in the nation and its monuments, heroes and values [cf Ghana and Senegal]

- Some people created the English Premier League, La Liga, Facebook, iPad, etc; you too can be a world beater from your Nigerian base
- Yet, learn from the positive experiences of youth in other lands – inventors, opinion moulders, talented professionals, bridge-builders, peace makers, writers, sportsmen/women – build bridges across divides and promote positive change
- Empower yourself to work in a group setting to make a difference – join others to form co-operatives, federations, associations – no single person can do it alone
- Imbibe the virtues of consultation, robust debates [“hard words do not break bones”] and consensus building - the essence of a democratic culture
- Take practical steps to exploit the opportunities in the challenges and prospects in your locality, state, region or country; working with your hands, heads and hearts – Information and Communication Technology; food production, horticulture, mass education; environmental protection/waste management, crafts
- Understand that too often great things start small; bite what you can chew; and do not be discouraged by initial hiccups; keep at it till you make that difference

Conclusion: Be the Hammer, not the Anvil!

I shall conclude with a story that I am fond of telling while teaching modules of the Caleb University Leadership Academy. It is about the experience of Germans after the First World War, when the post-war settlement imposed an unbearable burden of huge indemnity or reparations on the defeated Germans. So worthless did the German currency, the Mark, become, that women routinely went to the market with bagfuls of currency but returned with a handful of items. This was the context in which Adolf Hitler arose as a liberator from what was perceived as a humiliating capitulation to the “Diktat” of the victorious Allies. German ultra-nationalism flourished and the people resolved that they would no longer be the anvil but would be the hammer pounding the anvil. Though they were mobilized by an evil man to serve an evil end, the people initially responded to that rallying cry to unleash themselves from crushing war indemnity. In that sense, they unleashed their potential to uplift their nation. Today, I challenge you Nigerian youth, the hope and future of our country, to rise and declare that you would no longer be the anvil of bad societal and youth practices, mere dependent recipients of whatever

comes your way from above and abroad, but that, as **the hammer**, you would exercise initiative to pound youth shackles into instruments with which to unleash your God-given potential as leaders and change agents. I know “you can,” like the Biblical Caleb and Barack Obama of our age. May the Good Lord help you in achieving your positive dreams.

I thank you for listening. God bless.