

INDIVIDUAL ENTERPRISE, LOCAL PARTICULARISM AND DEVELOPMENT

By

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My Lords Spiritual and Temporal

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

I thank Professor Siyan Oyeweso and the organizers of this event for asking me to make this brief presentation on the occasion of the birthday of the Governor of Osun State, Ogbeni Rauf Adesoji Aregbesola.¹ I also join the governor's wellwishers in congratulating him on this attainment. Today's event is a far cry from that of 2007, which coincided with the launch of his biography, *The Fourteenth Commissar of Works: The Life and Labour of Rauf Aregbesola*, which I authored. Incidentally, my assistant on that project and former graduate student, Dr. Paul Osifodunrin, contributed the piece on Aregbesola in the volume being presented today.

¹ My thoughts on this subject have been enriched by conversations with Professors Bolade Eyinla and Tayo Adesina, and Dr (Mrs) Funke Adeboye and Dr. Ademola Adeleke. But they are not responsible for the opinions expressed here.

For the record, my first encounter with Governor Aregbesola, which was potentially confrontational, was also in the context of another book that I authored, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos, 1861-2000*, which contained a casual but critical remark about Governor Bola Tinubu's first year in office in comparison with Buba Marwa's tenure. What is of interest is that Governor Aregbesola, then Lagos State Commissioner for Works and Infrastructure, took an unusual step, quite unlike the average Nigerian man of power. Rather than direct his media assistant to issue a vitriolic rebuttal of the assertion in the book or to get me abducted for the Ohakim treatment, he sent his then assistant, the late Engineer Bola Lashengbe, to invite me to address the Annual Retreat of his Ministry at the Whispering Palms Resort, Iworo in the Badagry area. The Commissioner had intended to engage me in an intellectual debate to clear the air. Fortunately for me, I had made my presentation before he rushed in from Abuja that morning. So, he could only present his case without the opportunity of listening to and critiquing mine. It is to his credit that he fulfilled his promise to support a more comprehensive study of infrastructure development in Lagos State, including an assessment of his own stewardship. The point is that he is a leader who reads and is interested in intellectual discourse.

Accordingly, I regard today's event as a continuation of an ongoing dialogue on the broad theme of good governance and societal development. It provides an opportunity to reflect on the interlocking dynamics of individual initiative, sub-national identity formation and civic pride as building blocks in the nation-building enterprise at the regional and national levels. The collection of essays on Ijesa icons, a roll call of distinguished men and women in private enterprise, public service and God's Vineyard, also allows for reflections on the sterling qualities that drove these icons to national and international stardom – and, in several cases, made them role models. This discussion will be situated in the wider context of the role of individuals, especially outstanding leaders, in shaping their society.

Individuals and History

Historians and other commentators have grappled with the role of individuals in the making of human society. This may be expressed in a simple question: Is history all about heroes and heroines (or, "sheroes" as someone has called them)? This is definitely not the case. Individual-

centred histories are at risk of ignoring the role and the underpinning support of the masses, without whose support and sacrifice great men and women would not have flourished in power and influence. After all, there is no structure without a foundation or supporting pillars. No leaders without followers. Even a genius was taught by some people. But can we write a history without heroes? Not in the least. For great men/women will always emerge in society – for good or ill; by self-imposition or popular invitation.

At the global level, history provides striking examples of outstanding men and women, whose intervention changed the course of history. Historians cannot afford the luxury of counterfactuals but we can speculate on what might have been if such leaders had not intruded into and altered the course of their nations' history.

The history of Japan would have been different without the intervention of the young samurai, the self-styled *genro*, who overthrew the last of the Tokugawa shoguns in 1868. The country might have gone the way of China which was then virtually partitioned by several Western countries. It is likely that had Mao Zedong not provided critical leadership, China might have remained a playground for Chinese warlords, Japanese militarists and Western imperialists well into the second half of the twentieth century. F.D. Roosevelt's New Deal turned the catastrophe of the Great Depression on its head and re-launched the United States on the path of global dominance. Winston Churchill in Britain and Charles de Gaulle of the Free French provided the leadership at the critical juncture when their respective nations reeled under the Nazi onslaught. France collapsed and was revived, while Britain endured great odds to head off unprecedented humiliation.

In retrospect, we can imagine what might have happened if Josef Stalin had not decided practically at the last minute, right on the platform of the railway station, to ditch the plan to flee Moscow as the Germans were closing in. What is historical is that he chose to defend Moscow at great cost and succeeded in turning the seemingly imminent Nazi triumph to a rout. The history of modern Cuba is incomplete without the radical leadership of Fidel Castro. Everyone knows how critical Lee Kuan Yew's leadership was to the phenomenal rise of resource-deficient Singapore from third to first-world status within a generation. The alternative is left to the imagination.

Back home in Nigeria, specifically in Yorubaland, examples abound of the decisive interventions of notable men and women in the evolution of their societies and states – Moremi of Ile-Ife, Ogedengbe of Ilesa, Iba Oluyole and Aare Latoosa of Ibadan, and Obafemi Awolowo in modern Western Nigeria. The volume that celebrates Ijesa icons suggests that no society or people can achieve greatness without the galvanizing role of outstanding men and women, often in leadership positions. If anyone is in doubt, Nigeria’s post-independence history provides a striking illustration how a prodigiously endowed nation can be underdeveloped by a succession of incompetent and clueless leaders. It has been our lot as a nation to have had greedy, wasteful and incompetent leaders at the helm of affairs at three critical junctures of oil boom in the nation’s history – early and mid-1970s, 1991/92 and 2003, all occasioned by war-induced crises in the global oil markets. Again, it is tantalizing to imagine what an Obafemi Awolowo, who had managed the war-time finances of Nigeria without incurring debt, would have done with the oil windfalls from any of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and two Gulf War-induced oil booms. He is most likely to have generated and distributed at least 50,000 MW of electricity, laid modern rail tracks, generated gainful employment through integrated agricultural and industrial development, and implemented his beloved free education and free health policies without any external debts.

While the emphasis on leadership might be dismissed as monocausal and reductionist in certain contexts, post-colonial Nigeria validates the assertion that purposeful leadership – the role of the enterprising individual in history – is critical to development. This is underscored by a comparison with Meiji Japan and contemporary Singapore, which never had the quantum of natural resources with which Nigeria is so richly endowed. The point is that we might exaggerate, but cannot afford to underestimate, the role of leadership in societal development. Yet, we cannot also ignore the role of the unsung heroes on whose shoulders these outstanding leaders stood to achieve renown.

That individual enterprise in leadership positions, whether in a collegiate or personalized form, is critical to development is underscored by the initiative of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, which instituted an annual award for outstanding leadership in Africa. It is revealing that since former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano and Festus Mogae of Botswana won the inaugural

awards, no other African leader has been deemed qualified for it. This speaks volumes about the role of uninspired and uninspiring leadership in the continent's backwardness.

Enterprise, Leadership, Community and Nation-Building: Ijesa Particularism in Perspective

If we agree that individuals can and do make a difference, especially when operating in leadership positions, to what extent can we attribute their success to membership of their primordial community? An interesting question worth considering is: What makes the Ijesa tick? Is any or all or none of the following factors critical to the rise of the people we are celebrating today: genetic make-up peculiar to the Ijesa, physical environment, communal world view, a culture of individual or group competition, family values, attitude towards accumulation and thrift, group solidarity, forces unleashed by the community's precolonial (and subsequent) history, migrations and cosmopolitanism, a pact with formal education, religiosity of diverse descriptions, and a sense of manifest destiny?

Fortunately, a survey of selected outstanding Ijesa men and women indicates certain qualities that distinguished them, which may or may not be peculiar to the Ijesa – forthrightness and integrity (as exemplified by the widely celebrated Justice Kayode Eso), innovativeness in governance and institution-building (as epitomised by the late Chief Bola Ige in Old Oyo State, Professor Hezekiah Oluwasanmi at the University of Ife and, most recently, Rauf Aregbesola within his first 100 days in office as Osun State governor), doggedness in political leadership and a fighting spirit (with Ige and Aregbesola as striking examples), humility and obedience to a higher calling (Pastors Timothy Obadare, Enoch Adeboye and William Kumuyi in Nigerian and global Pentecostal Revival), sheer erudition and love of education (as demonstrated by the array of distinguished academics and successful professionals), and self-development, adventure and enterprise (illustrated by the *osomalo* and their successors in business, and I.K. Dairo and Moses Adejumo, a.k.a. "Baba Sala" in the entertainment industry).

That said, we should acknowledge those who did not make this collection. Among them are those that can be described as "The Jews of Eastern Yorubaland," the unsung Ijesa entrepreneurs in my native Akokoland: the Fajukes, Anifowoses, Asimolowos, the Adagunodos, the Aregbesolas, etc. These Ijesa men and their families were true frontiersmen in that corner of the

world. They achieved manifest success and blazed the trail as pioneers and pathfinders in those local communities. Some of them, in addition to being astute businessmen/women, were also active promoters of either the Jehovah Witness doctrine or freemasonry, two traits that tended to define a section of the small Ijesa elite in my growing-up years. But, whatever was their faith and calling, the Ijesa in their homeland, and in the Yoruba and wider diaspora, added value to the home and host communities through their peculiar thrift, diligence, doggedness and, perhaps, a sense of manifest destiny, which is what today's occasion celebrates. As an aside, debt-collecting agencies of the Nigerian government and modern entrepreneurs have much to learn from the uncompromising tactics of the Ijesa *osomalo*.

Without preempting the reviewer of the book on Ijesa icons, it is important to underline the thread that runs through these lives. In their various callings, they applied themselves with diligence, overcame sundry obstacles and challenges (even when they had a privileged background) and identified opportunities where others wrung their hands in helplessness. For the most part, they dared to be different, even when in the minority; they took risks, faced down daunting odds, refused to compromise principles, avoided shortcuts - the easier and more popular route - and paid the price necessary for success. Consequently, they attained leadership positions in their various professions and callings through sheer enterprise and commitment, and proceeded to influence and transform their society.

What is striking about these Ijesa icons is their cosmopolitanism and mobility. Practically all of them lived in other parts of Western Nigeria while some lived in Northern Nigeria (Kaduna and Jos, in particular) as traders, professionals and scholars. As they sojourned abroad to pursue business opportunities and brighter career prospects, they still retained their essential Ijesa character – thrift, truculence (with the caustic tongue), sagacity and doggedness. Yet, they consciously or unconsciously absorbed elements of the culture and practices of their host communities, often intermarrying with them and speaking their language. In effect, while we celebrate the Ijesa achievers, we must pay tribute to the host communities in which they blossomed as traders, professional and scholars.

This cosmopolitanism gave the Ijesa a certain level of sophistication and enlightenment, which may be expressed in the Yoruba expression – *olaju*. It, therefore, informed Ijesa attitudes to

formal education, entrepreneurship, and social and political mobilization. To be sure, cosmopolitanism is not a monopoly of the Ijesa as they are not as widely dispersed in Northern Nigeria and West Africa as the Ogbomoso and Ejigbo, respectively. It also does not fully account for Ijesa exceptionalism. For example, the equally, or even more, migratory Ogbomoso have not achieved as much success or visibility as the Ijesa because, it is suggested, most of their early migrants to Northern Nigeria were artisans and traders, who did not give as much attention to self-development through formal education, especially in the professions (Professor Bolade Eyinla, oral communication, 2011). Paradoxically, in terms of strategic positioning in the national power structure, the less dispersed Egba have done better than the Ijesa, presumably because, as a colleague has volunteered, the Egba have a better grasp of the “language of power” (Eyinla, oral communication). This might be interpreted as the mainstream Ijesa political inflexibility, which is one of their defining characteristics. Ijesa warriors – from Ogedengbe, through Ige to Aregbesola – had been quick to dash to the barricades, where they remained entrenched long after the war-weary had abandoned the struggle.

The Pitfalls and Potential of Local Particularism and Civic Pride

As we celebrate the outstanding Ijesa honoured in a collection of short biographies today, we need to address the fears in some quarters that celebrating local identity poses a threat to regional integration and nation-building. The pertinent question is: Will not local particularism promote fissiparous tendencies in the polity? But the question should be posed differently - Can local particularism and civic pride be harnessed to positive ends? In other words, is it possible for a global citizen to have a local constituency? An appropriate response is the *Ijesa Icons* volume which documents Ijesa contributions to regional, national and international development in the fields of law, education, religion, institution building, community development and business. Another is to refer to developments in other lands.

Local regions of the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France, Germany and Japan retain pride in their peculiarities while still assuming the national character. The Ijesa and the larger Yoruba nation share some affinity with Western European nations and Japan in terms of relative cultural homogeneity, while the Nigerian nation-state is more comparable with the United States, which is the archetype of a heterogeneous nation-state. American racial and social

diversity is complemented by regional identification with the Deep South, New England, Middle America and the American West. Yet, the country has largely succeeded in managing these complexities to achieve greatness.

Like the Yoruba, the apparently homogeneous English and Japanese retain their local accents and peculiarities. Witness, for example, the Cockney, Mancunian, Liverpudlian, Yorkshire and Geordie accents and micronational identities in England, and the division of the main Japanese Island of Honshu into the Kanto and Kansai regions, each with its local peculiarities, such as manner of salutation. For instance, while the Kanto (Eastern Japan around Tokyo) would say “ohayo gozaimasu,” the equivalent among the people of Kansai (Western Japan in the Osaka-Kyoto axis) is “okini,” both conveying the same message.

The point is that Nigeria can emulate these countries in harnessing local particularisms to achieve national greatness. Local particularism hinged upon local heritage sites, monuments and cultural practices have been harmonised into the driving forces of a booming tourism industry. Nothing, not even media manipulation, fuels tourism better than the cultural (including culinary) variety and diversity in a country or region of destination. There is, therefore, no need to obliterate diversity in pursuit of artificial cultural homegenization. Our widely travelled leaders and citizens need to understudy and apply lessons in successful societal integration processes – in the face of cultural diversity and local particularisms - elsewhere to ongoing efforts at regional and national integration in Nigeria. The point is that the Ijesa and other Yoruba sub-groups are at liberty to retain their particularisms, which are assets that enrich the common pool of the Yoruba national character, woven around the *omoluabi* personality. What is required is a careful documentation, preservation and conscious sustenance of our material and intangible cultural artifacts and other assets for future generations. For example, the Ijesa should revamp the *eni Ijesa* (Ijesa local mat-making artisanal industry) for both heritage and economic purposes.

However, while Ijesa and other communities should retain and deepen their peculiar positive attributes, they should jettison the less flattering ones or imbibe the attributes of others in appropriate contexts. While the Ijesa, for example, are at liberty to retain their proverbial caustic tongue, they can do with a dose of the diplomatic skills of the Oyo and Egba. Moreover, common ties across Ijesaland and the wider Yoruba region, as exemplified by festivals, traditions

of co-migration in antiquity, physical contiguity, inter-marriage and commercial relations, should be reinforced to build bridges for communal harmony and co-operation across artificial administrative boundaries. Special events commemorating the settlement of communities, and the installation of kings and chiefs, annual community days and other traditional or modern rallying points should be deployed to mobilize resources for local projects, facilities and monuments, and discuss issues of common concern. As Ruth Watson has demonstrated in her illuminating, discursive study of Ibadan, communal revival and solidarity for societal development, which do not have to be targeted at other communities, evoke civic pride and are veritable tools of social mobilization.

Conclusion

Let us conclude by highlighting the following. First, it is appropriate to celebrate outstanding men and women. The aim is to highlight what we need to emulate in them and lessons to learn from both their successes and failures. Second, with reference to the Ijesa icons, we learn that great men and women are made, not born; that success is essentially a product of grace and grit, and not of genes. Third, local particularism is not necessarily negative or anti-developmental; it can be a force for positive change and progress at the grassroots level. In effect, you can love your community without hating others, or, as Obafemi Awolowo admonished, you must strive to be first and foremost a good citizen of your local community or primordial group before aiming to be a good citizen of Nigeria. Fourth, Ijesa, Yoruba and Nigerian peoples should learn to accept the reality of diversity and the common humanity of all creatures of God irrespective of their creed, race or class. Whatever are our prejudices and stereotypes, we must realize that there is no alternative to peaceful co-existence as the bedrock of sustainable human development. Finally, as we honour outstanding Ijesa men and women, we are also challenging other sub-groups of the Yoruba to emulate the Ijesa in the spirit of enterprise and positive competitiveness.

But there are two caveats. First, we should be wary of romanticization, phantasm stereotyping, overgeneralizations, exaggerations, creation of personality cults and uncritical adulation. For the people that we are celebrating today were/are mere mortals with their own flaws that we should learn to avoid. But this does not detract from the well-deserved credit due to these distinguished

Ijesa personalities. Second, we must acknowledge that not all Ijesa have made positive contributions to Ijesaland, Yorubaland or Nigeria. The Ijesa community, like any other, has its own fifth columnists in the local and wider settings. It shares with its counterparts elsewhere internal contradictions, which manifest occasionally in inter-communal tensions and political conflict.

Consequently, the community should undertake individual and collective soul-searching to reinforce positive values of altruism and selfless service. It should stress heritage and values, which have served as enduring bonds in the community. Those being celebrated today should ensure that their legacies are edifying and note that it is possible to fall from grace to grass. This occasion also calls for sober reflection on the part of aspiring leaders on the sort of legacy to bequeath (will it be edifying or dubious; enduring or ephemeral?) and how they plan to achieve greatness.

After all is said and done, the virtues that we celebrate in these Ijesa icons are not peculiar to them. Indeed, the Ekiti cousins of the Ijesa, the Ijebu, Egba, Oyo and other major groups of the Yoruba can parade a comparable array of men and women of distinction in their various callings. Indeed, any of these groups standing alone can rival even the best of Africa's post-colonial states in the quality and density of high-calibre human resources and leadership potential.

In the final analysis, we can conclude with a proposition. This is that to the extent that our Ijesa icons exemplify certain enviable and noble traits, particularly *agidi Ijesa* (Ijesa stubborn adherence to principles) and *ifarada* (perseverance), both of which have served our birthday Governor so well, and which are also attributes of *omoluabi*, there is an Ijesa in everyone of us.

For now, let us felicitate with Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola and wish him good health, long life and many years of positive service to God and humanity. We also need to challenge him to display the Ijesa genius in the development of this Yoruba heartland State while cooperating with like minds in achieving the Yoruba Renaissance. Our common refrain is: Yes, you can; so shall we, working together and with God!

Thank you for listening and God bless.

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- Appointed Professor on October 1, 1998, Head, Department of History (2001-2004) and two-term elected Dean of Arts (2005-2009), all at the University of Lagos.
- Holder of (1) Japan Foundation (2) British Academy (3) DAAD (Germany) (4) IDE (Japan) (5) Leventis (UK) and (6) Chapman (UK) post-doctoral research fellowships, and (7) the WARA Travel Grant/Residency (Emory University, USA), between 1993 & 2005.
- Author of 5 books, 3 monographs, 51 book chapters and 42 articles in 20 journals of maritime, economic, social, transport, imperial, global and African history (Authored books - *Maritime Trade, Port Development and Administration: The Japanese Experience and Lessons for Nigeria* (Tokyo, 1996), *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos, 1861-2000* (Ibadan, 2003), *The Liverpool of West Africa: The Dynamics and Impact of Maritime Trade in Lagos, 1900-1950* (Trenton, US, 2004), *Culture and Customs of Liberia* (Westport, US/London, 2006), *The Fourteenth Commissar of Works: The Life and Labour of Rauf Aregbesola* (Lagos/Winnipeg, 2007).
- The University of Lagos Best Researcher in the Arts/Humanities for 2006 and 2009
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- Member, editorial boards of *African Economic History* (Madison, USA), 1998-2002; *Afrika Zamani: Journal of the Association of African Historians* (Dakar, Senegal), 2001-2005; *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* (USA), 2010- and *Journal of African History* (Cambridge, UK), 2011-
- **Assistant Secretary, Nigerian Academy of Letters, 2010-**
- External Examiner/Professorial Assessor, 12 Nigerian and Ghanaian Universities, 2004-
- Convener, Network of Nigerian Historians, 2010-
- Member, Governing Council, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), 2011
- Listed among Nigeria's 100 Foremost First Class Graduates
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