

THE INDISPENSABLE HUMANITIES

Chairman's Speech on the Opening Day of the International Conference on "The Humanities, Conflict and Development in Africa," College of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Redemption City, Ogun State, NIGERIA

Kabiyesi, The Olowu of Owu, Host Vice-Chancellor and beloved brother, Professor Z. Debo Adeyewa, Principal Officers of the University, Dean College of Humanities, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am grateful to God and to the organizers of this great Conference for the honour of chairing the opening session of this international conference. Exactly a week ago, I delivered a lecture, "The Sea in Human Affairs," during the Students' History and International Relations Week here at RUN. So, this is a happy homecoming for me. May the Lord continue to bless His work through this University.

We live in a world that is obsessed by the wonders of science and technology, the din of money-making by whatever means and rising incidence of insecurity. In the face of this cacophony, so aptly dramatised by the latest advertisement by Richard Quest on CNN's "Quest Means Business," it is easy to forget the Humanities, which UNESCO calls the Human Sciences, but which could also be tagged the Humane Sciences. Originally the cradle of all knowledge, the Humanities disciplines have been pushed to the margins and especially so in this country, where values have been corroded and it appears that whatever cannot make or translate to quick money does not deserve respect and attention. Even in matters of governance, where the human sciences have a natural edge, pseudo-experts have taken over the space and the Nigerian world is now besotted with popular soapbox or motivational speakers at the expense of dyed-in-the-wool academic intellectuals, whose fortress is the university. Since Nigerians tend to listen more to foreign speakers, I strongly recommend everyone here to take advantage of a segment of the latest episode of Fareed Zakariah's Global Public Square (GPS) - an autobiographical presentation on the indispensability of a Liberal Arts Education for everyone. That is why my speech is entitled "The Indispensable Humanities."

But I should first commend the Dean of the College of Humanities, Professor Ahmed Yerima, Dr. Harry Olufunwa and his team for organizing this Conference, and for attracting the cream of academic and other experts to reflect on the important theme of “The Humanities, Conflict and Development in Africa.” It is fitting that our keynote speaker is none other than Professor Dele Olowu, best known to me for his copiously cited book on the governance of Lagos. I salute him and his equally distinguished sibling, Akin Olowu, the Professor of Psychology, whose collection on Xenophobia I had the privilege of contributing to. So, I expect a rich harvest of ideas from presentations at this conference, beginning with what promises to be a thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating Keynote.

That said, I wish to remind those who have made it an official policy to sideline the Humanities – except on occasions where national festivals are organized or some controversial milestones, such as the Nigerian Centennial, are being marked – that there is no killing the Humanities. Usually, on such occasions, the real scholars get mere cameo appearances while the stage is dominated by the usual crowd of politicians and their technocratic accomplices. Yet, as the nation faces the mortal threat of a horrific insurgency, it is best to remind ourselves that such phenomena should not be approached merely from the viewpoint of military strategy or the usual political quick-fixes. We need to historicize and contextualize these issues locally and comparatively. We also need to humanize governance, which in this country has been reduced to statistical abstraction and macroeconomic sleight of hand. This has led to the rebasing of the economy without a noticeable improvement in the people’s lives, accountability in public life and the quality of service delivery.

Back to the theme of this Conference, I humbly suggest that we see conflict and development as a dialectic in a broad, somewhat positive, sense. It is the conflict of ideas, visions and strategies that will lead to a better world for us in Africa. The Humanities will help us by deploying the innate strength of the constituent disciplines on display during this Conference – the capacity for reflection, the benefit of hindsight, heritage preservation, grounding in cultural values and sustenance of our collective memory in songs, festivals, traditions and cultural practices – towards understanding and resolving physical and ideological conflicts in Africa.

I congratulate the organizers of the Conference and look forward to two days of robust intellectual engagements. I plead that civility and tolerance of contrary views should characterize these exchanges. I request that the best papers be published and circulated for wider consumption. But do not be under any illusion that Nigerian leaders and policy makers, who need this kind of education, will read the book. In 2008, the Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos under my leadership published a book, *Global Understanding in the Age of Terrorism*, a collection of selected papers from an international conference like this. I contributed a chapter on maritime terrorism. I doubt whether anyone in the Nigerian government has ever read the book, published by the University of Lagos Press, which anticipated the current security challenges that the country faces. Perhaps your own book will get a better reception.

On this note, I formally declare this Conference open and wish you fruitful deliberations.

I thank you for your patience. God bless.

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