OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY
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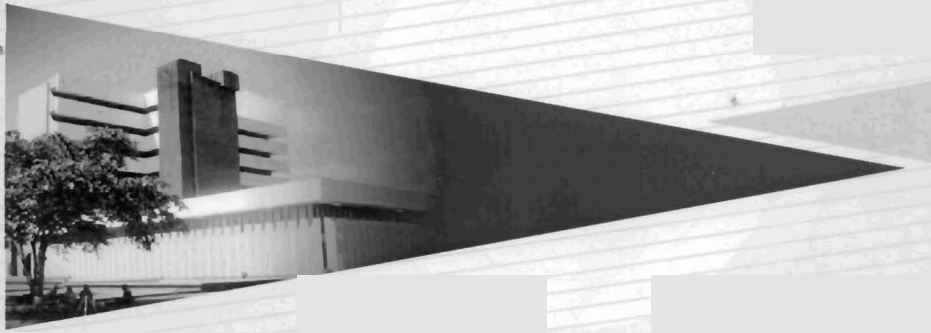
42RD CONVOCATION LECTURE



UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: REVISITING THE IFE DREAM

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Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Professors, Lecturers, Administrators and other officials of Obafemi Awolowo University, our graduates and parents of today, distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

I thank you, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, for the honour given me to serve as the guest lecturer at the 43rdConvocation Ceremony of your illustrious university the university where I first made my mark as an academic, one of the two universities to which I owe the pride and inspiration of my life in the pursuit and promotion of knowledge, one of the foremost citadels of learning in Africa and the world.

I shall be speaking on the chosen subject "University Education in Nigeria: Revisiting the Ife Dream". This means that, to speak of university education in Nigeria, I shall exemplify with the specific development and experiences of Obafemi Awolowo University. Obafemi Awolowo University was, and is, wonderfully unique in many respects, but the general direction of its history is also part of the general history of university education in Nigeria. Like most of the early great universities of Nigeria, Obafemi Awolowo University had its beginnings in an era in which the Nigerian

federation was truly a federation, an era in which Nigeria's leadership culture, as a result of Nigeria's constitutional structure, empowered the leaders of the Regions of the Nigerian federation to pour out their souls and give great legacies to the peoples of their Regions. But another era came when an all-consuming federal establishment presumed to be the only authority that must control all aspects of the life and management of Nigeria. That era became a time of pains and agony for university education, indeed for all levels of education and all facets of socio-economic reality, in Nigeria. That, briefly, is the outline of the history of most aspects of life and university education in Nigeria.

Obafemi Awolowo University is the peak of the modern achievements of the Yoruba people of the former Western Region. It is the most exalted modern product of a people whose civilization has emphasized education and intellectual pursuits from ancient times. The Yoruba were an urbanized people from as early as the 10th century AD, and their living in many towns and cities facilitated various levels of structured learning. When Western education began to come with Christianity to Africa in about the 1840s, the Yoruba accepted and promoted it more ardently than any other

African people. By the 1850s, the Yoruba were already sending some locally educated youths to Europe for higher education, and by the 1860s they already had university graduates in various fields of learning. By the time the British amalgamated various peoples to create Nigeria in 1914, the Yoruba part of Nigeria was far ahead of the rest of Nigeria and Africa in Western education. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Western education expanded steadily in Yoruba land, and gradually grew in the other parts of Nigeria too. In 1948, the British colonial administration of Nigeria established Nigeria's first university institution in the Yoruba city of Ibadan. In 1954-5, the first indigenous government of the predominantly Yoruba Western Region inaugurated a system of Free Primary Education for the Region, thus generating mass enrolments in primary schools.

Sharp needs arose in the Region for rapid expansion of education at secondary and tertiary levels. Secondary schools and teacher training institutions sprang up all over the Region, some established by the communities, some by Christian and Muslim bodies, and some by private citizens.

By 1959, the heat was on to start a Western Regional university. And coincidentally, the Nigerian atmosphere came in helpful. A 1954 World Bank mission to Nigeria had recommended that Nigeria should considerably increase its university level facilities and enrolment. A commission appointed by Nigeria in 1959 recommend that, in addition to the University College Ibadan, three new universities be established immediately one Regional university in the Northern Region and another in the Eastern Region, and one federal university in the Capital Territory of Lagos. The thinking was that since the federal University College Ibadan and the new federal University of Lagos would be in the Western Region, the Western Region did not need a Regional university. But, in the Western Region, the spirit of the time was that the people of the Western Region knew their needs and were not used to being outpaced by any other Region. Therefore, the Western Regional Government announced immediately that it was proceeding to establish its own Regional University at its own expense, without any dependence on federal financial assistance.

Typically, thorough discussion then began about the Western Region's University. Immediately, in the excitement of the time, big arguments arose over the siting of the proposed university, with nearly every major

Yoruba town pleading its own superior suitability. By and by, most people conceded that Ile-Ife, the "ancestral home" of the Yoruba people, had the best claim. On October 24, 1960, the Premier of the Western Region, Chief Ladoke Akintola, officially announced the decision to establish "Ife University, Nigeria".

Solid planning then went into motion. The Region was richly blessed with senior and experienced university professors and administrators, many of them in the University College Ibadan, and many more in universities in Britain, the United States and other countries abroad. A University Planning Committee was set up. To meet the high expectations of the people all over the Region, the government appointed very senior public officials and university people to the Planning Committee. Chief Ọbafemi Awolowo, until 1959 Premier of the Region, and Leader of the Official Opposition in the Federal House of Representatives, added the great influence and prestige of his person to the committee by accepting to serve as its chairman.

The University of Ife was opened in Ibadan in 1962, while its permanent campus at Ife was embarked upon. In 1967, it began to move to its permanent campus in Ile-Ife.

In 1972, after Ife University had lived for over five years on its permanent campus at Ife, the Governing Council asked me to write a history of the first ten years of the university. (The book, *Ten Years of the University of Ife, 1962-72*, was published early in 1973). In the process of researching it, I had, among other things, to interview many of the prominent citizens who had been responsible for the founding and building of the university. According to these men and women, the Western Regional Government and the Planning Committee were, from the beginning, constantly flooded with messages from people from all over the Region that they wanted their university to rank among the greatest and best universities in the world in physical structures and appearance, and in academic excellence. The Region's authorities set out proudly to build such a university.

As the construction work at Ife was commencing, the Western Region was hit by the terrible political crisis of 1962, resulting in serious disruptions of governance and order in the Region. In the midst of the storm, the federal government cut the Midwest away from the Western Region, and the Western Region became an exclusively Yoruba Region. Through it all, work on the new campus continued unabated. In fact, after the Western Region

was cut down to an exclusively Yoruba Region, the work on the university was even speeded up.

From the beginning, a major objective was to step away from the pattern of university development designed by the British colonial rulers for the University College Ibadan. The Ibadan plan was to provide university level education for only a small number of young Nigerians. In contrast, the Ife plan was much more ambitious; and students' enrolment expanded from just over 200 in 1962 to over 4000 by 1977.

Expansions in academic programs were phenomenally ambitious. The university started off with only a few faculties Arts, Science, Social Sciences and Pharmacy. Starting from 1967, the year the university began to move to its grand new campus at Ile-Ife, Ife University embarked upon constant and well considered reviews and expansions of the academic programs in order, as the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor H.A. Oluwasanmi, often put it, to meet the goals set by the founders and owners of the university and the demands of a developing Nigeria in an intellectually and technologically dynamic world.

In a presentation to the University Senate in late 1967, Vice-Chancellor Oluwasanmi identified the central

objectives of the expansion. These were to build a solid foundation of liberal education in the arts, sciences and applied sciences with a view to providing the graduates with a sound background of education for full and meaningful participation in the life of their communities; to stimulate interest in and appreciation for African culture and heritage through teaching and research; to evolve a truly African pattern of higher education that will serve Nigeria and its people as well as the world community; to continuously seek ways and means of assisting Nigeria in its search for satisfactory solutions to its many social, economic and political problems.

In line with these objectives, the Faculty of Agriculture quickly developed into a Faculty of five Departments Animal Science, Plant Science, Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Engineering, Extension Education and Rural Sociology. The Faculty of Law experienced one of the fastest expansions in the university, and became a major factor in legal education in Nigeria.

When the university decided to establish a Faculty of Engineering, the federal government moved in and countermanded the plan, on the grounds that a Faculty of Engineering already existed at two other universities, Lagos University and Ahmadu Bello University. Ife

tactically overcame the obstacle by establishing, not a Faculty of Engineering, but a Faculty of Technology with the Departments of Electronics and Electrical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Computer Science, Food Science and Technology, Agricultural Engineering, Metallurgy, Materials Science, and a Centre for Nuclear Energy Research and Development. All these disciplines did not exist in ABU and Lagos or in any other university in Nigeria or even Africa. The Federal Government had to bow to the fact that this new Faculty of Technology was indeed important for the development of Nigeria.

In the Faculty of Social Sciences, a Demographic Research and Training Unit was set up in 1969 for the purpose of researches in population studies. It developed into a Department teaching courses in Population and Human Ecology, Population Research Methodology, World Population and Population Problems, Census and Vital Statistics, Fertility, Family Planning and Population Policy.

A Department of Geology was created in 1967, offering courses in Minerology, Crystallography, Petrography, Structural Geology, Stratigraphy, Paleontology, Economic Geology, Groundwater Geology, Geochemistry, Geophysics, and Geological Mapping.

This Department immediately developed an emphasis on field work and consultancy.

In the Faculty of Arts, there was added a Department of Modern Languages (teaching European languages) as well as a Department of African Languages (teaching Yoruba and other African languages).

A Faculty of Education was founded, including a Department of Education, a Department of Adult Education, an Institute of Education, an Institute of Physical Education, and a School of General Studies. This Faculty quickly became a very major factor in the life of the university. Its Department of Adult Education powerfully met the founders' wish that their university should, in addition to its teaching and research functions, also generally make itself a living force in all the communities of the Western Region. The Institute of Education developed programs linking with the Teacher Training Colleges in the Western Region, with the objective of helping them to upgrade the quality of teacher training. And the Institute of Physical Education developed the most advanced physical education programs in Nigeria. As part outcome of its programs, students of the University of Ife, men and women, became, year after year, frontline performers in Nigerian university sports and international university sports.

The Institute of African Studies developed into a strong centre of inter-disciplinary research and seminars, with constituent units in African history, archaeology, linguistics, musicology, art, drama, and photogrammetry. It also established in the city of Ile-Ife a cultural centre named Oriolokun Centre, which annually held a large Ife Festival, attracting people from all over the world.

In general, there developed, among the faculty, a very virile culture of research. A University Research Fund was set up to make grants to individual research as well as to Departmental and group research programs. Various research programs also attracted grants from various sources beyond the university, including grants from the Western Region's private citizens, businesses and organizations, and from various international agencies.

By the mid-1970s, reports of researches at Ife, as well as reports of various pioneering directions in higher learning there, were attracting great attention - especially researches in the Faculties of Agriculture, Technology, Pharmacy; and in the Departments of Agricultural Engineering, Electronics and Electrical Engineering, and in Geology. The consultancy group of the Department of Geology won great acclaim with its

discovery of tar-sand in the near-coastal area of Ondo State, and its Director won a National Merit Award thereby. The researches in the Centre for Nuclear Energy Research also earned its Director a National Merit Award.

Researches in the Faculty of Technology produced, to mention a few discoveries, the yam-pounding machine, a number of machines for agricultural mechanization, an impurity-free domestic grinding machine, a laterite/lime compaction machine for low-cost building, a film rolling machine, and others. The Faculty of Pharmacy pioneered researches in the chemotherapeutic effect of the local plant, *fagara*, on sickle cell anaemia, research that attracted much attention worldwide.

When the Faculty (now College) of Health Sciences was established at Ife in 1972, its curriculum departed from those of all earlier Nigerian medical schools. These other Medical Schools and Teaching Hospitals followed the British medical training model, were hospital-based, and were curative-care orientated. Ife introduced a novel community-based, primary-health-care curriculum, featuring assignment of a number of families in rural Ife communities to each student for health monitoring and continuing care through clinic attendance and home visits.

The Faculty of the Social Sciences pioneered the introduction of entrepreneurship education at the undergraduate level. In the same Faculty, the Department of Economics pioneered researches in Nigerian small businesses, and the Department of Demography pioneered programmes in Nigerian population studies

In the humanities, the Ife Departments of History, of African Languages and Literature, and the Institute of African Studies, became together a leading centre of research in African History and African Culture. The Faculty of Education pioneered research in the use of the mother tongue for the teaching of children at the primary school level the programme known as the Ife Primary Education Research Project.

Thus, the University of Ife was charting new fields and new orientations in higher education in Nigeria from the 1960s. Its plans were confidently ambitious from the very beginning. And its progress and achievements in the course of just over a decade are proof of what a university, dedicatedly supported by its public and its friends, can achieve.

On the whole, the University of Ife started and rose loftily as an ambitious intellectual force dedicated to

quickly raising Nigeria to the level of countries in the highest peaks of learning, technology, and intellectual excellence. It was imbued with the collective psychology of a high achiever from start, and in only a few years, it became a great and widely respected university.

Meanwhile, to accommodate the university's academic programs and community needs, the university's permanent campus near the ancient city of Ile-Ife rapidly developed into a magnificent university city. In line with their ambitious dreams, the founders of the university had granted it a land area of 13,800 acres. There, in the midst of the green forests and against the backdrop of beautiful hills, most of the new campus had risen by 1975.

The man who led most of this program of development and building was Prof. H.A. Oluwasanmi, formerly Chair of Agricultural Economics at Ibadan University, who was appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1966. To satisfy the yearnings of the people of the Western Region, Military Governor Adekunle Fajuyi asked the new Vice-Chancellor to do everything to move the university to its new campus in Ile-Ife by early 1967. That set in motion a major speeding up of the construction work. The first Faculties to move to the permanent campus did so in January 1967. By the time the university celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1972, virtually all of it was on the

new campus. Observers throughout Nigeria, and visitors from all over the world, hailed the new campus as the most impressive campus in the country. In the title of a book written about the campus in 1976 by two members of the faculty, including today's lecturer, the new campus was introduced as" Africa's Most Beautiful Campus".

Over the university's first few years in its permanent campus, its university community developed many programs known as Town-and-Gown Programs aimed at fostering contacts and mutually fruitful relationships with the ancient city of Ile-Ife. This was a kind of orientation hardly known before in Nigeria's university development. In line with the general dynamism of the university, as soon as the Nigerian Civil War ended in January 1970, the university sent teams of faculty members to the Eastern Region to search out Ife students of Eastern origin who had been affected by the war there, and to encourage them to return to their studies. It was very risky to go at such a time to the Eastern Region where a war had just ended and where life was only beginning to return to normal. But, happily, many students were assisted to return. Some Eastern academics affected by the war were also given jobs at Ife.

A pervasive dream and spirit of mission powerfully motivated the academics, administrators and other servants who served the university. There arose a mass of distinguished achievers in all fields. The working out of the Ife dream assembled and produced countless men and women of great stature.

Altogether, all the years I have been describing so far were years of positive developments and growth, not only in the life of our schools and universities in Nigeria, but also, to a considerable extent, in the life of our whole country. At our country's oldest university in Ibadan, and at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, and Lagos University in Lagos, the common spirit was to push towards excellence in all directions. Our country had its troubles even in those years of course. For example, we had our federally engineered crisis in the Western Region in 1962-65. But, on the whole those were years of considerably responsible and dignified leadership, public servants and governments, years when most prominent citizens in the service of our country in any sphere gave dedicatedly and even sacrificially to society without seeking to acquire huge personal wealth thereby.

The echoes of that general excellence were still quite loud when I left Ife in 1979 to go and serve in the Nigerian Senate. In 1982, as a Nigerian Senator, I was invited by the Republic of South Korea to deliver a lecture in the South Korean Institute of International Affairs in Seoul. I was asked to speak on the growth of relations between Nigeria and South Korea. In parts of my speech, I dwelt proudly on the enormous successes which we in Nigeria had achieved in the field of higher education. Our leading universities, I said, were among the very best young universities in the British Commonwealth, and so were our University Teaching Hospitals.

But even by the time I was saying those great things for my country far away in Seoul, I was aware that worse days were already coming over Nigeria. In the course of the three decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, after a civil war and under succeeding military dictatorships, our country saw terribly evil days. I will limit myself to the impact of it all on our universities, especially its impact on the wonderful experiment in university excellence which the world had been seeing at Ife.

The idea of a university as an important cultural asset, and of university people as adventurers on the frontiers of human knowledge, became discounted and despised

among the military rulers of Nigeria. The Western Region, like the other Nigerian Regions, was split into smaller states, and the military regimes then sought to micromanage all areas of Nigeria's life. The University of Ife, like all other major assets created by the Regions, was taken over by the federal government on the grounds that the new small states were too small and too lacking in resources to keep such assets properly.

In the opinion of most informed citizens of what used to be the Western Region (the original owners, builders and friends of the University of Ife), perhaps the only salutary thing done to their university by its new federal owners was to change its name to Ọbafemi Awolowo University, in honour of Chief Ọbafemi Awolowo, the leader of the political group that had first conceived, planned and built the university for the people of the then Western Region. In the same vein, after the death of Prof. H. A. Oluwasanmi, the man who had led the university through its great period of growth, the university community graciously named the University Library after him as Hezekaiah Oluwasanmi Library.

For the rest, from the 1990s, especially in the time of the corrupt military dictatorships of the 1980s and 1990s and their equally corrupt civilian successors, all education came to hard times in Nigeria. Under disinterested, or

even hostile, federal management, the old great universities of Nigeria were generally robbed of morale, and the younger federal and state universities established after them generally followed suit. Denied resources, treated as arms of government bureaucracy, and imposed upon to assume curriculum uniformity in the misguided belief that that would serve the interests of Nigeria's unity, Nigerian universities considerably stumbled. Constantly under withering pressure and denied their basic entitlements, university professors, administrators and other ranks repeatedly went on prolonged strikes, and university students frequently revolted against the unwholesome conditions of their university experience. Consequently, universities were frequently shut down, usually for long periods of time.

For the great university that the people of the Western Region had succeeded much in building at Ife, these experiences were devastating. For those who were part of Obafemi Awolowo University in its great years of growth and expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, news about the general conditions of Nigerian universities by the beginning of the 21st century could be very depressing indeed - even though Obafemi Awolowo University continued, and still continues today, to be ranked among the best universities in Nigeria in all areas of university life.

In 1983, the Nigerian federal government set up a panel on "Nigeria Since Independence", under the chairmanship of Prof. Tekena Tamuno, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan. The panel published a set of eleven volumes, titled, "*Nigeria since Independence: the First 25 Years*", on various themes. The last volume was on Science and Technology. Of the 18 contributors, 9 of them were from Obafemi Awolowo University, thus underscoring the leading role that Obafemi Awolowo University and its scholars have been playing in Nigeria's university education.

Most leading educationists of Western Region origin would have loved to have Obafemí Awolowo University remain in the possession of its real owners, the people of today's Southwest as a joint asset of the six small states to which the Southwest has been split. But to a federal establishment that is bent on controlling all of Nigeria; that has been emphatically unacceptable.

I humbly repeat my congratulations to the Vice-Chancellor, the academic, administrative and other officials, as well as the students, of Obafemi Awolowo University. I congratulate you for standing tall and holding out strong, and for upholding the very best of university stature in this great university of our people, even through the debilitating storms of these times.

I congratulate our graduates of today, and I wish you all success as you take the light from this great university to a Nigeria that is darkened by thick clouds of untruth, inequality, animosity, corruption, bloody conflicts, and poverty. As you go out, you must proudly hold up the light which you are bringing out of your Great Ife, and you must never lose the will and the resolve to give, to serve, and to bring hope back to the lives of our people.

I thank you all.