

Remarks at Stephen Oluwole Awokoya Foundation for Science Education 9th Annual Lecture and Award of Scholarships.

My first word must be to thank the Trustees of the Stephen Oluwole Awokoya Foundation for Science Education for inviting me to be the Guest of Honour at this Foundation's 9th Annual Lecture and Award of Award of Post-graduate Scholarships.

I am indeed very glad to be here to join in honouring the memory and achievements of an outstanding contributor to the development, not only of science education generally in our country.

I was a student at the University College of Ibadan in the last two years, 1954 to 1956, of Chief S. O. Awokoya as Minister of Education in the then western Region of Nigeria. I do not think that there can be any doubt that one of the great successes, and as such, one of the great legacies of Chief Obafemi Awolowo's government was the successful introduction of universal free primary education in the old Western Region.

From the Western Region, S. O. Awokoya subsequently made outstanding contribution to the educational development of Nigeria during his unique combination of two posts as the first Nigerian Chief Federal Adviser on education and Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Education.

He was also one of the early Nigerians (after Godfrey Amachree, the first African Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and General Aguiyi Ironsi, the first African commander of a United Nations peace keeping force in the Congo) to go at a senior level into the service of the international community when he served as Director of UNESCO in Paris, heading that organisation's Division of Science Teaching and the department of Scientific and Technological Research and Higher Education among others. This was before he became the Deputy Director General of UNESCO.

With such a background, it was most appropriate that Chief S. O. Awokoya was in 1974 appointed Professor of Education at the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University.

I have often wondered what Professor S. O. Awokoya would say if he was alive to see the state of education in our country today. He would surely lament the fact that at all levels, the standards that he and his generation ha struggled to establish have so obviously declined. And that for example, in 2000, the Nigerian Federal Government invested only five percent of its budget in education when other African Countries like Botswana and Mauritius were investing 25 percent and 26.7 percent respectively.

Nigeria is continuously described by all and sundry as a country of great potential. Regrettably, this description is fast becoming that of a country of unfulfilled potential. Of the many things that we need to do in order to reverse the current trend, education is one of the priority areas on which our Federal, Staten and Local Governments should focus. For the experience of countries like Malaysia which started at the same, or even lower level of the national endowment, but which are today ahead of Nigeria in terms of overall national development, has shown that education is key to national development.

And here I must add the view that we cannot achieve the rate and the level of development to which our nation's human and material resources entitle us, if we continue to sustain the current structure of polity.

I believe that the groundnut pyramids and leather factories of the old Northern Region, the universal free primary education and the booming cocoa industry of the old Western region, and the cooperative agricultural and the nascent industrial development of the old Eastern region were possible because we had at the time, a truer federalism with significant devolution of development powers to federating units that were more viable than the 36 states we have today.

If we are to learn any lesson from the recurring incidence of communal conflicts in parts of the country, from the current spate of unsolved murders, from the serious inadequacy of such basic facilities as health, education, and other social amenities, and from the continuing debate over some fundamental aspects of our constitution, it is that the 1999 constitution, which was foisted on the country by the military regime, is not conducive to a stable and progressive development of our country.

The present government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo should be commended for starting to put in place creditable macroeconomic and other reforms. But the fact still remains that the government simply cannot find adequate resources for the necessary level of the essential foundations including education for an acceptable pace of our national development if we continue to spend more than 75% of our national revenue on the governance structures imposed by our existing constitution.

We need a constitution and structure of government that will be the product of a national consensus arising from a national dialogue that is as I have said on the other occasions, a national conference of representatives of the country's pluralistic population.

In conclusion, I want to congratulate this year's recipients of the Stephen Oluwole Awokoya Foundation for Science Education Postgraduate Scholarships. I hope that they will all be inspired by the pioneering role and achievements of the man whose name is borne by the awards they have received.

And finally, I would like to congratulate and wish the Foundation continued success in its efforts to sustain through these Awards and Lectures the contribution of Professor S. O. Awokoya to science education in our country.

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