

TO COMMEMORATE GENERAL OGBEMUDIA'S 70TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS.
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By
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When I was asked if I would like to attend Dr Samuel Osaigbovo Ogbemudia's 70th birthday celebrations in London, I smiled and accepted the invitation. I smiled because I saw it as an honour to dine on the same table with this great Edo son. I was convinced that this is a birthday celebrations worth attending inspite of my crowded weekly schedule. Like many Edo sons and daughters, I benefited immensely from his tenure of office as Military Governor of Bendel State. It was then the idea crossed my mind that I should put together the achievements of this worthy Edo son who can be described as a brave soldier, a successful businessman, a taskmaster, a visionary, a politician, a sportsman, an economist, industrialist, educationalist and above all a Nigerian to the core.

OGBEMUDIA THE SOLDIER.

He became popular in Benin City in 1967 when he physically led the Nigerian Federal troops to retake the ancient capital city of Benin from the rebel forces without destroying the city and its numerous historical sites. The people were in a jubilant mood after spending six weeks of hell under the Biafran rebel forces.

Initially he was made the Military Administrator of the Midwest region and soon after his position as the Military Governor of the Mid West region was confirmed. The Edo were soon to experience a period of their most rapid growth economically, educationally, politically, industrially as well as physical development of the state. Ogbemudia had a hands-on type governance to ensure things were done to specification. To show their support for his regime people embarked on numerous self-help development projects. His physical energy was described as boundless and inexhaustible. General Ogbemudia attended War Colleges in the USA and the Military Academy in the UK as well; majoring in counter insurgency.

OGBEMUDIA THE EDUCATIONALIST.

As soon as he settled into his new post as the Military Governor, he set the machinery into motion for the establishment of a university in the state. The people of the state were in dire need of a university as the university that was earlier proposed for the Benin and Delta provinces was shifted to Ile-Ife for political and tribal reasons. He established the Mid West Institute of Science and Technology which metamorphosed into the University of Benin in 1973. This was no mean feat as there was a moratorium at that time for the establishments of universities in the country. Edo sons and daughter answered his call to come home and take up appointments in this young university and make it viable.

He did not stop there, he went on to establish the School of Agriculture at Awain in Asaba, the College of Education at Abraka and various secondary schools in the state. Scholarships were awarded to deserving Edo children. With the establishment of these tertiary institutions, Bendel State became a Mecca for numerous overseas visitors.

OGBEMUDIA THE INDUSTRIALIST.

To achieve gainful employment for the people of the state, he established the Bendel Brewery, the Bendel Pharmaceuticals to produce basic drugs for the commonest disease conditions in the state. He went on to establish the Wood treatment factory, the Bendel Lottery, the Bendel Newspapers co-operation, Radio Bendel, Bendel Line to ease the transportation problems of our people, and many more too

numerous to count. He also refurbished the three traditional industries in the state. The Asaba textile mill, Ughelli Glass factory and Okpella cement factory.

OGBEMUDIA THE AGRICULTURALIST.

Ogbemudia was keen to feed the people of the state and ensure self sufficiency in food production hence he went on to establish Bendel Food production company which was generating birds, eggs, poultry meat, milk, palm oil for our tables meeting the nutritional needs of our people. His administration established the Iyanomo Rubber research Institute to improve rubber production for the future, Agbede cattle ranch and Ughelli fish ponds to satisfy the needs of our people economically and nutritionally as well.

OGBEMUDIA THE SPORTSMAN.

Bendel state consistently was on top of the league table during the National Festival of Sports and Athletic competitions. He did not need to buy ready made athletes from other states. Our sportsmen and women were trained from the 'raw state' to world best athletes. To achieve this, he established the School of Physical Education at Afuze. He rebuilt the Ogbe stadium with its world class swimming pool and lawn tennis courts. His administration financed the Ogbe Hard Court Lawn Tennis Championship which attracted international tennis stars to Benin City in the seventies. Bendel state was regarded as 'numero un' throughout his tenure as the Military Governor of Bendel State.

OGBEMUDIA THE ECONOMIST.

In pursuit of an economically viable Mid West Region or later Bendel State, he established the Bendel Insurance, the New Nigerian Bank which is the first indigenous bank in Nigeria with a branch in an International economic nerve centre of London. He constructed roads, bridges and improved the telephone links of the state with other parts of the country. He built the Palm House and the State Secretariat both two high rise buildings in the state

OGBEMUDIA THE POLITICIAN.

As the Governor of Bendel state he had to make good moves to win the friendship of the then Head of State General Gowon which on the long run yielded a lot of dividends for the people of the State. Even after leaving office various Nigerian Military regimes approached him to hold viable positions especially as it related to sports.

His second coming as a Civilian Governor of Bendel State was short lived and therefore of no consequence. Ogbemudia has continued to influence policies in the State as Chairman of State political party organ. In recent times, he hosted the Bendel State Consultative Council, a pressure group to improve the political standing of Edo and Delta states in the Nigerian body polity and to fight for a minority President for the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This move has generated a lot of flax from political commentators who feel the move is belated.

UNFINISHED PROJECTS,

His administration saw the need for a state of the art hospital, and this was planned for Sapele road in Etete Layout as well as the Akenzua Sports' Stadium which will befit the state as the leading sporting state of the Federation. These plans were never realised as his government was swept from power in 1975 following another military coup.

I can only judge Ogbemudia from a distance based on his numerous activities and achievements as I have never worked closely with him. I am glad to say that he has done more for the Edo than all the rest who have who spent time in the Government House put together. He has left his footprint in the sand for posterity and he will always be remembered for his accomplishments.

As a human being he is God's Gift and Blessing to Edo Land. When shall we have such another?
Please join me in wishing this illustrious Edo son a happy birthday and many happy return of the day.

DR STEPHEN OGBONMWAN.