

UNITY THE BEDROCK OF PROGRESS.

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It is a great honour to be invited as Guest Speaker at the Annual General Summit of Edo Community of Nigeria, Germany e.V.

Unity is an appropriate and very timely theme for an occasion like this because unity is the bedrock of progress and development. It is timely because we need progress in all areas of human endeavours now than ever before in Edo State, the supposed heart beat of Nigeria. When the heart beat or the ticker stops, the man dies. So events in Edo State, a microcosm of Nigeria, have a far reaching effect in the outcome of the Nigerian Nation. It is therefore important that our state should be in the forefront of revamping the national economy like the old days of Bendel State, the foremost Nigerian State in the ninety seventies.

Why are we in Diaspora?

In the seventies we were not coming abroad with a one-way ticket, If we did, we went back home after completing our studies to take our place in the society. But nowadays the story is different. The situation and conditions of things at home are so deplorable that our people are no longer able to endure or cope with them. As a result, everyone is thus pushed or compelled to venture out into the Diaspora and become economic refugee in a foreign land.

- ⇒ Each and every one of us here bears witness to the plundering of the government treasury at various times in our recent history.
- ⇒ We bear witness to unexecuted contracts where mobilization fees have been collected to establish projects that would have created job opportunities for some of us and our people.
- ⇒ We bear witness to the incompetence of governance and lack of statesmanship of the various Chief Executives of Edo State.

- ⇒ We bear witness to non payment of workers salaries and pensions of retired workers.
- ⇒ We bear witness to retrenchment without economic and progressive basis.
- ⇒ We bear witness to our children hawking wares along Ikpoba slope and around the Ring road in Benin City instead of being in their classrooms.
- ⇒ We bear witness to the reintroduction of school fees through the back door in Edo state where other Nigerian States are paying their indigenes to go to School.

It is as a result of the above circumstances and many more that we are in Diaspora.

We left Edo State shores because we could not join them in propagating this man's inhumanity to his fellow being and plundering the government treasury. We all arrived by various guises, as students, stole-away refugees, on specialist or further training programme, to join husband or to join wife. In spite of the varied way we all came into economic servitude, we have one thing in common - that is our willingness to see a better Edo State and Nigeria. It is for the same reason we are gathered here today to find ways and means of providing a meaningful contribution to the development of our homeland

While our critics will say we ran away because we could not bear the heat in the kitchen in Edo, our coming into our new abode is actually a blessing for our kin at home. All of us here have been contributing our widow's mite into Edo State economy annually. We have become the work horses of the deprived Edo people. We have become the great provider of social security, which the government is incapable of providing for the teeming masses of our state. In effect, the government is making the masses to become more dependent on their kits and kin in the Diaspora for their health and emergency needs.

In Edo State today, the only thought of every average person is to go abroad with the hope of picking euros along the pavements of Berlin. You and I know nothing can be that farther from the truth. Most traditional houses now have the NOT FOR SALE SIGN to deter family members from selling family homes and using the proceeds for the passage abroad. Unknown to our brothers and sisters at home, we wash plates in restaurants, clean toilets, look after old persons, drive taxicabs, act as guards and security men and do other menial jobs to raise the funds which we send home as only a handful of us are working with our professional qualifications.

Those of us in Diaspora also contribute unknowingly to this frenzied crave of our brothers and sisters to come abroad. We work very hard for twelve to twenty months and take the money home to spend it in two or three weeks creating the wrong impression of the way we live in our adopted countries. This kind of attitude draws unnecessary attention to us at home and it makes us easy targets and victims of armed robbery and increases the desire for others to seek the proverbial golden pastures abroad.

In spite of our hue and cry on the cyber space, our voices are not heard and our warnings are not taken seriously. The reason for this is partly due to the flagitious attitude of those in government in Edo State and their unwillingness to listen to good advice. Another reason is that those in government surround themselves with party members with the mindset of the winners take it all without caring for the teeming Edo masses. Also, the very fact that those of us in Diaspora are not well organized to form a formidable group or body to cause the effectuation of the desirable changes in Edo State or we have lost focus and forgotten home completely accounts for the manner the government view our contributions.

Diaspora Edo Making a Difference in Edo State.

The Edo people in Diaspora in spite of their training in law, finance, management, political science, human psychology, medicine etc. have not been able to make a substantial impact in Edo land due to lack of unity of action and unity of purpose and lack of unity of heritage.

So far we have been involved in pockets of various activities in Edo State, from scholarship award to deserving students to adopting wards in Central Hospital Benin City. We need to do more. We need to be involved in effective and visible projects in Edo land. As individuals we may be respected by our friends but collectively we are not thought of much because we are not included in the scheme of things in Edo State. This should not be the case. We can organize ourselves into and form a unifying group that can move mountains in Edo if only we choose to do so. But can we make that choice and follow it up with sacrifice both in sparing our time and financial resources? That is the question.

Working Together for the Good of Edo State:

Today we have Edo Global Organization, Edo Okpamakhin and Edo Nation Association of the Americas (ENA) and a plethora of other Edo Associations in Diaspora all pursuing different agendas without a meeting point or a clearing house like our contemporaries of the other Nigerian

nationalities do. The blessings and gifts of these associations differ greatly. Acting separately, they will continue to make little impacts but working together and pooling their different gifts and talents for common use, the result will be awesome and Diaspora Edo will be surprised at what they can achieve.

This cooperation that we speak about is envisaged to cut across party political lines; it should cut across religious beliefs; it should cut across ethnic divide; with the main focus being what is best for Edo State and Nigeria. Then we can work together as one body, speak with one voice, sustain a common agenda and take active part in the process of change that will definitely come to pass in Edo State and Nigeria.

To reach that goal, we have to constitute ourselves into one front and working together will ultimately strengthen the component parts. By the components parts, I mean the various associations that form one unifying group for all Edo people due to the centripetal forces at play. This will improve output and facilitate progress and economic emancipation for the benefit of our people.

The shine of the moon is different from the shine of the stars and the shine of the sun. Together they light day and night whereas separately they can either light the day or the night but never both simultaneously. Secondly their beauty differs and the effect of the combinations of these three celestial sources of energy will be awesome. It can be so for Edo Associations or Organizations in Diaspora working together if they choose to do so.

The worry is the strong lack of trust and suspicion of the motives of the various individuals working for the team spirit to prevail. This may make the desired unity virtually impossible to achieve. The luck on our side is that those who think cooperation is the way forward are in the majority.

For example, Edo Global Organization as the union of all separate Edo associations in Europe which forms its foundation and building blocks will also ensure its stability.

Due to its broad base and solid foundation, like mount Zion, it will weather any storm. This is what we seek for all Edo in Diaspora.

In practical terms, we have been cooperating with one another. We need to take this to a higher level of cooperation to execute meaningful projects for the benefit of all in the land of our birth. In that way we will be regarded as messengers of good tidings and agents of change and progress.

In financing our projects, we all recall the arguments at Verona in Italy where a small minority wished that we go cap in hand to source for funds. I will repeat what I said then that we shall be regarded well and respected and it is more honourable if we have done so much which we can show as a testimony to our commitment to our course before asking for any assistance. I recall the Chairman of the occasion agreed totally with me as well as a lot of our brothers and sisters. Begging for fund when the cup is half full will galvanize donors more than when the cup is completely empty. That is why we need to make the initial sacrifice.

Emphasising Edo Unity in Diaspora.

I have defined unity elsewhere and would not dwell on it here again to avoid repetition. I will refer you to www.edoglobalorganization.org

I cannot stress the need for this unity more as the result will be overwhelming since there is total failure of the political system in Edo State which is apparent even to the blind man in spite of what some newspaper reporters try very hard to sell. A hard sell it has been indeed. If a government without any opposition or hindrance to its activities cannot make a visible impact to the lives of our people, then we are in serious trouble.

There is no doubt that we need a strong platform from which we can execute not only our projects but effect desirable changes in Edo State collectively or by proxy. Behold, how good and how pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity, to achieve a purpose in unity and so edify our heritage in unity. Those who think one brethren or one group is better than the other or that one brethren or group should compete with one another or do things separately because our individual endowments differ are ignorant.

Where has a tree made a forest?

Aye iku rhie Udo, Oye loghor!!

Each of us is endowed with a different gift just like the shine of the moon is different from that of the star or the sun. The utilization of the combination of these gifts and talents brings out the best of the groups; in this case Edo in Diaspora.

We should therefore endeavour to work together with one another and in so doing keep Edo Unity of Purpose not only in Edo Land but in Diaspora within the bond of peace, mutual trust, mutual understanding and respect for our individuality, our respective religion, political affiliation and ethnicity.

We constitute many parts of a whole that is ancestrally, historically and genetically linked and we shall function best as one body with one purpose.

For example If a skilful writer from say Edo Global Organization writes a prose to be delivered by a powerful orator from Edokpamakhin in a huge gathering put together by ENA, the result will be overwhelming, and the outcome most desirable for the benefit of all. The overwhelming result will be the fruit of cooperation born out of unity of purpose and unity in diversity. In this regard, the objective will be that the best among us will be representing all Edo people in Diaspora in articulating our desire for a better Edo State. In so doing, barking behind closed door will be banished forever as we will take the bulls by their horns by our action.

Co-operating with the System on the Ground in Edo State.

Sometime ago, one of our brothers wrote in Edo Nation forum that there was no government in Edo State for us to work with which implied we should abandon hope.

I responded by saying that there are at least two parallel governments in Edo State, the civil and traditional. No matter how badly the civil government may be performing, they still represent Edo State and as such we have to do business with them, cooperate with them and make useful suggestions to them to enable them do better for the benefit of our people.

The traditional Edo System of government is unrivalled in modern civilization.

With the Omo n' Oba as the head and custodian of our custom and tradition;

We also have the palace chiefs and the town chiefs headed by the Iyase, the ~Prime Minister'

In every district and now streets in Benin City for example is an Odionwere or Okao who administer the district or street on behalf of the supervising chief of the area who in turn, is responsible to the Omo n Oba.

Under the supervision of these Okao in various communities are the Ikpologhe the youngest group, followed by the Igbama who make things happen in the various communities; then the Edion, who take crucial decisions in the council of elders chaired by an Odionwere or an Okao.

This system is repeated in most Edo towns and villages with an Enogie or Enogie or Onogie or Onojie, as the head. In view of the above, we have a very effective and virile administrative system in place which any good civil government can draw upon and use for its own benefit and for the benefit of our people through effective and efficient mobilization of people.

For us to be effective as Edo in Diaspora, we must connect with our grassroots and identify with whatever they are doing.

Political parties will come and go, party chairmen will come and go but our traditional roots will remain forever. It is for this reason that I consider them the most effective vehicle to mobilise our people for a good course.

Similarly an effective civil government in Edo State must connect and work closely with our traditional ruler ship system who can reach farther than party members who are more prone to congregate in urban centres. Secondly, the traditional rulers know our customs and tradition well and they can easily cut across party political divide, religious divide and divide due to ethnicity.

The Edo people in Diaspora have assimilated other cultures and can weigh the merits and demerits of various attitudes and adopt the best which they can safely introduce into Edo culture. We therefore constitute a special group that can be a catalyst for change not only in Edo State but in Nigeria as a whole.

Our Oba has led by example by introducing some changes into our people's culture and tradition in keeping with modernisation; he has gone further to present the true picture of the history of our people in his aeon making book 'I Remain Sir Your Obedient Servant' which has caused earthquakes in some quarters. He has led from the front, and our duty as true Edo citizens now is to follow. And follow we must!

We can arrive at that critical point in Edo history where there is peace, harmony, progress, economic emancipation, health, wealth and total fulfilment of our people in the community of ethnic nationalities of our country Nigeria.

In addition to the above, we must identify, associate and co-operate with other cultural groups in Edo Land for example the Benin Forum as this will facilitate the desirable changes we are hoping for and keen to introduce.

My brothers and sisters, there is no one group that can do it all alone; we must therefore cooperate with each other, unite for a common cause and achieve that change or changes we all so desperately want. Those advocating segregation are not speaking in the best interest of our people.

Investing in Edo State.

In all we do, we should not forget the land of our birth, the land that gave us life, the land of our ancestors, the only place we can truly call our home on mother earth.

In happiness and joy - in despair and hope - even when the road of life becomes a little too rosy, or a little curvy or a little too long, we should always remember home in Edo Land. It is only in remembering that we can work harder to make it better.

The idea of sending money home regularly which I have preached in the past may not be a good solution in making Edo State progress like other parts of our country. In fact, it may create a problem of over dependency.

We could go a step further by setting up small to medium scale enterprises based on our skills or exposure here that could employ a few individuals in Edo Land, then we would have contributed more to the economic development of Edo State and in the same vein Nigeria as a whole. We all recall the Chinese saying of teaching people how to fish and feeding them for life rather than giving them fish which only feed them for a day.

Our people are proud people and do not want handouts. They want to be gainfully employed and earn a decent salary from a decent job for a decent living.

It may not be possible for individuals to set up such a business; therefore, a few of us could form co-operatives to pull our resources together to set up business enterprises that will employ labour if we trust one another. There are numerous areas yet untapped in our state which we can go into and even make profits that will make us smile when we get the dividend at the end of the financial year.

By providing employment, we will not only be improving the Edo State and Nigerian economy, we will also be reducing crime rate as the idle mind is the devils workshop.

In spite of our bashing of the government and showing their inadequacies, the truth of the matter is that the government alone cannot provide all the necessities of life for our people. There is no where in the world that is done. The people must also contribute their quota towards their own welfare. Public spirited individuals who have must share with those who have not. Our people must be mobilized to get involved in self help development projects. We have done it in the past. We can do it again with good leadership and effective publicity. Those who have no money to donate can donate their expertise, and those who have no expertise can donate their time and those who have time but no skills can donate their labour.

While we are making this effort, the government must also contribute by creating an enabling environment to ensure such small to medium scale enterprises prosper. Good roads and security of life and properties are important to success of such ventures. It is obvious therefore that it will be the cooperation of the government or people on the ground in Edo State on one hand with those in Diaspora on the other hand that will ensure success.

We can also improve Edo State economy by projecting the image of Edo and Nigeria in Diaspora and working to make it a tourist attraction and destination. There are a lot to offer in Edo State. Tourism sustains the economy of many nations. We can invite our friends to come on holidays and be their tourist guide until the establishment of viable tourist companies in Edo or improvement of the existing tourist companies.

Conclusion:

Finally, I call on all of us gathered here today to be law abiding, to be good ambassadors of Nigeria and Edo Kingdom in particular in our abode in Europe so that they will not regret our presence here and so prevent other Edo from coming in for their post graduate training and further studies.

You must see it as a duty to enhance the good name of our country Nigeria in all you do at work, on the highway and in your various places of study, in your homes and in your relationship with your spouses especially those of European descent.

I have said a lot today but our people say you only tell an Edo man one word and in his/her mind, it will form a million words, he/she will know where you are going and where you are coming from; hence, the knowledge of our ancestors is the knowledge of the ages.

Once again thank you for this opportunity! Remember together we can make that Change we so desperately need. This is not the time to say it does not concern me as it does concern all of us.

It is clear we cannot change our yesterday, we can unite and work hard today for a glorious tomorrow.

May the peace and serenity of our God, Osanoghodua be with us today and always and may the good spirits of our ancestors allow this address to take a firm root in our hearts and mind so that we can make manifest what we have heard to day.

Oba ghato Okpere Ise!

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