“HOW MEN MAKE HISTORY”

By

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Being the text of the University Lecture to commemorate the 77th Birthday of The Hon. Chancellor, Chairman-Board of Regents and Proprietor of Igbinedion University, Okada; Chief Sir (Dr.) Gabriel Osawuru Igbinedion, JP, CON, on the 9th of September, 2011.

Introduction:

I would like to begin this lecture by thanking this great and unique University and its management for giving me the honour to present this prestigious lecture designed to commemorate the birthday of an illustrious son of Africa. I wish to thank most sincerely, my mentor and role model, Rev. Professor Eghosa E. Osaghae, the Vice Chancellor, Igbinedion University, for counting me worthy to deliver the University Lecture in honour of our father, The Hon. Chancellor, Chairman- Board of Regents and Proprietor of Igbinedion University, Okada, Chief Sir (Dr.) Gabriel O. Igbinedion, JP, CON, LLD, D. LITT, GCKB, who is celebrating his 77th birthday this week. We wish him many more happy years in the service of humanity.

This great man, whom we are honouring today, has come a long way. That, to me and to the forces of history is not the most important thing. The most important issue here is that the critical element of what he stands for is undeniable. He is a man of stature who has contributed immensely to the shaping of our past, our present, and of course, our future. His image as a cosmopolitan and global phenomenon has counted so much in
making out of him a man with an acute sense of vision. His intercultural dexterity is prodigious. He is a proud son of Edoland and indeed of the entire continent of Africa. In that respect therefore, I also wish to identify myself more profoundly with this land and its people. I thank the people of Benin in particular and Edo State in general for giving me a warm welcome to a place I have always considered as home. Indeed it is a ‘dream come true’ not only to stand before you all today but also to be amongst you.

Distinguished Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to celebrate and honour a historic personality. Why is he worthy to be counted as one of those we are considering as outstanding? Our foray into historical discourse will soon reveal this. But let us first interrogate the processes that distinguish those who make history from those who do not.

**How Do Men Make History?**

In the life of Nigeria as an independent nation, this is a propitious time to look at the lives of our great men and women as we try to understand the forces that have shaped our collective destinies. We all know that Nigeria is a polyglot composition of over 250 different ethnic groups. The country was artificially constructed into a state without any regard for ethnic or cultural differences. In spite of these and despite the manifestation of several centrifugal tendencies, men and women of stature and goodwill have arisen to propel the country towards the path of development. To comprehend the significance of these individuals or groups and their contributions to nation-building, one needs to examine their roots, experiences and tasks to properly make sense of the complexities and challenges of rising shoulder high in a country like Nigeria.

In the recent past, historical scholarship has begun to connect meaningfully with our understanding of the forces that have propelled this nation to greater heights. Newer
and empirically more productive investigations of local and national figures, issues and events have now recorded and reported these copiously. It has become possible to now relate these findings with an understanding of the contributions of these individuals to national and global existence. Nevertheless, there are great gaps in our knowledge of how great men in Nigeria have reached and kept their lofty heights. A great deal of what we think we now know is based on unverifiable and spurious evidence. Therefore, we historians have the onerous task of scientifically researching into and documenting the lives and contributions of our great men and women as our contribution to human knowledge. According to Fred I. Greenstein, “it is only by making explicit our beliefs and subjecting them to the test of reality do we advance.”

What then is the relationship between man and history? It was President Harry S. Truman, the 33rd president of the United States (1945-1953) who said and I quote “…Men make history, and not the other way round. In periods where there is no leadership society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.” This proclamation has pushed me towards the study of the Great Men and the Hero in History. I therefore became greatly fascinated by the works of the American pragmatic philosopher and scholar, Sidney Hook (1902-1989). Known for his contributions to public debates, Hook has also been quite well known for his contributions to the Philosophy of History. I am therefore basing this lecture on the template created by Hook for analyzing how men make history. From what I have read from Hook, I can come to an early conclusion that The Hon. Chancellor and Chairman-Board of Regents of this University has been an extremely courageous man
who has kept faith with destiny and history. That is not surprising. This is because he is a true son of the land.

It is clear that neither humanity nor the task of creating its universe is finished. Thus, there are men and women who have taken up the task of further creation. However, in order to give direction to our discussion today (and at the risk of oversimplification), I have adopted the criteria suggested by Sidney Hook, an American scholar to understand how men make history. Sidney Hook, the author of the well-known book, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* argued that, “When a society is at the crossroads choosing the direction of further development then an individual can turn to play a dramatic role and even become an independent power on whom depends the choice of the historical pathway.” In his seminal work, he gives a clear number of examples of the influence of great people and these examples are mostly associated with some crucial moments in history. Of particular importance to this lecture therefore is Hook’s classification of historic personalities into two broad categories. These are: (a) the ‘eventful man’ and, (b) the ‘event-making man.’ These two categorizations are used, depending on the influence of such men and women on the historical process. A major question we are asking today by using Hook’s approach is how should we view Chief Igbinedion? As an ‘eventful man or as an event-making man’? It is, however, appropriate to point out that although Hook had been criticized for this classification, we have nonetheless found it appropriate in this discussion. It is usually important for those concerned with the history of Africa to understand something of the depths of the historical experiences of the African people and by extension, their roots. That for us is a more precise criterion for understanding the total man in Africa.
The Bini People and the ‘Mandate of Heaven’:

Let us begin by taking a long view of the tradition that spawned the well-known Bini spirit of industry and the inimitable balance of drive and integrity. According to tradition and legend articulately reconstructed by the well-known Benin historian, Egharevba, the Bini people are the custodian of a proud and deep heritage. Several other scholars have reaffirmed this view. From this combination of sources we can therefore build a picture of a great people who went on to create the Benin state and expand it into a powerful West African empire. This period represented a turning point in the history of Benin kingdom. Consequently, Benin’s influence came to dominate a wide swath of the area that is now known as Nigeria. Thus, it would appear that the Edo people had from the pre-colonial period been imbued with the mandate of heaven in creating and establishing a great and enduring civilization.

One thing noticeable in the Edo is that desire to create a more basic society and community spirit. From the Ogisos to Oba Eweka to Ewuare the Great, history has regaled us with high-flying Obas and their considerable influence in creating and stabilizing the Benin State. Even during the period of the painful adjustment brought by British colonialism, we are conversant with the patriotic zeal of Oba Ovonramwen in his fight against colonial domination at the expense of his life and throne.

Benin kingdom also played host to European traders, missionaries and adventurers. The famous Benin port, Ughoton was significant in the socio-economic development of the town.
What of the citizenry in general? The oxygen that animates our existence is culture. It also constitutes an index of man’s historical consciousness. Bini art and crafts are some of the best in the world. The world will never forget that popular mask, the famous Benin Ivory mask of Queen Idia stolen from the room of Oba Ovonramwen by the British. The Bini are therefore regarded as a deeply cultural people with one of the greatest pedigrees on this side of the planet. They are a people imbued with that fecund and creative mind geared towards an enduring group identity.

So well established has been the Edo tradition for honour, civility, decorum, sacrifice, industry and an indomitable spirit that these have become recurring factors in their history. Their pre-colonial stature, drive and courage had never vanished under the depredations of British imperialism. We should refrain from recounting only the glorious past of the Bini people. This is because just like any other people, the Bini have their negative sides. But the positive far outweighs the negative. The successes of Bini sons and daughters nevertheless had their contexts, trajectories and results.

**Chief Igbinedion: The Humble Beginnings:**

Entrepreneurs provide the most spectacular example of the role people play in community or national development. Nobody would link a future Gabriel Osawuru Igbinedion with such a feat. This was because he had such a very humble beginning that only a very strong soothsayer would have been able to predict the path towards the future. Chief Igbinedion, born into the family of Okunozee and Josiah Agharagbon Igbinedion grew up under a father who was an employee of the Public Works Department, and a mother who smoked fish for a living. With such modest backgrounds,
you do not dream big! Fate was to deal a crueler blow. At the age of 14, he lost his father and he had to follow his Uncle, Mr. Idahosa to Benin as his ward. But this move equally played a significant role in his future career. After his secondary education, he began working at a tender age, assisting his uncle in block moulding and in timber and rubber trade. In 1955, he took up employment as a messenger in the Adult Education Department after which he joined the police force in 1959. Out of all this there emerged an enquiring spirit and a hardworking and diligent young man. After a stint with the police force, he teamed up with an expatriate lady to establish his first company, the Mid Motors, which first traded from the sitting room of his family home. In 1964, he relocated to Benin to take up an appointment as the regional sales manager of Leventis Motors. In 1967, he left this company to establish a motor sales and service firm. In the 1970s, his firm, the Mid-Motors became involved in the assembling of Hino Trucks in the country and was considered the first motor assembly plant in Nigeria. When the firm obtained distributorships from Hino Motors, Yamaha, Nedion Fiat and Marcopolo buses, an indigenous entrepreneur had come to learn partnership strategies.

**Okada: Philanthropy in His Blood**

One characteristic that became obvious in the life and essence of the Chief is that sense of realistic optimism, which he enhanced through the notions of community. He is a home boy made good. But by becoming good, he did not carve an identity independent of his own community. Now, Okada has become the specific mode of identity through his particularizing and familiarizing the global space of a small but vibrant community. The establishment of the ultra modern Igbinedion Hospital and Medical Research Centre
situated at Okada and commissioned on 4th May 1993 by the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, President Ibrahim Badamosi Babanigida, (represented by the then Vice President, Augustus Aikhomu) represented a monumental developmental in the lives of his people and this great nation. The hospital, regarded as the largest private hospital in Nigeria and created as part of the Okada Wonderland development, comprised of 600 beds, a 150-bed maternity ward, 80 VIP suites and four presidential wards. It also incorporates seven clinical blocks and six ancillary buildings- all set in an area covering an area of approximately 40,000 square metres. Significantly, the hospital also established the Lady Cherry Igbinedion Invitro Fertilization Unit. The medical centre was also adequately equipped for advanced diagnosis of various illnesses.

Let us hear the motive for the construction of this monument from Chief Igbinedion himself. In the address he gave at the foundation laying ceremony of the complex in 1986, Chief Igbinedion had proclaimed:

The hospital was not cited here for the size of Okada town, but as service to humanity. Over the years, I have noticed that many Nigerians have the routine anxiety of going overseas regularly for medical check-up and attention. In my view, this unending health pilgrimage to advanced overseas countries for medical attention, does not only lower the nation’s self esteem, but also constitutes a huge drain on our external financial resources. Why must all Nigerians, irrespective of status not have the best medical attention in the country? Good medi-care should be within the reach of our people, that is why this hospital is being constructed. I strongly believe that just as we are striving to be self reliant in other fields of endeavour we can do likewise in the area of health care delivery and research. I want to make this modest contribution to humanity of providing a well-equipped hospital with adequate modern facilities, while the medical staff with their expertise and specialist knowledge will provide the services.\textsuperscript{8}

The speech of Chief Igbinedion is as relevant today as it was in 1986. He has also gone ahead to establish a number of private hospitals across Nigeria.
The nation has benefitted so much from his largesse not only in the social realm but also in the spiritual. Chief Igbinedion has constructed numerous churches including the Grand Catholic Cathedral. Let us adopt the speech of this great man as a mantra. He has pursued a common interest and goal irrespective of whether you are from the north or from the south. Through his interactions, he maintains a common touch and presence.

It is obvious from this initiative that the medical facility is more a monument to the cause of humanity than a business concern. If we all begin to take pride in who we are and in what we are or in what we can do for our nation and its people, Nigeria will be a better place for us all. So, having in several important respects changed the development direction of his home community, Chief Igbinedion can be considered an ‘event-making man.’

The Triumph of Enterprise:

The eclectic nature of Chief Igbinedion shows a remarkable triumph of enterprise. Under his Okada Group, Chief Igbinedion created one of the most massive business empires in sub-Saharan Africa. This section of my presentation draws upon real-world developments in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of our subject’s significant impact on the domestic and global economy. Today, the debate in economic development centres, is on the role of the private entrepreneur in the development process. The role of the entrepreneur has entailed key developments in trade, transportation, finance and investment and other commanding heights of the economy. Underlying the expansion of the economic space in Nigeria have been the activities of several enterprising individuals. Such individuals have linked both the domestic and national economies much more closely to one another than we care to notice. This has increased the capital base of this
country significantly. More and more nations have been pursuing neoliberal economic policies such as deregulation and privatization. But if African governments were only converted to this thinking in the mid-1980s, several forward-looking entrepreneurs like Chief Igbinedion had preached and epitomized the spirit of private enterprise as the major weapon of dynamic development and progressive change. He was the quintessential businessman. His highly imaginative economic enterprises became household names across the country. It will be instructive to recall some of the enterprises and how they evolved from the stable of the Igbinedions over time.

*Okada Airline*

This huge business concern developed when even the bravest quaked in their shoes. When the full history of this enterprise is eventually written it will go down in the economic history of Nigeria as a bold and brave initiative. The airline was established in 1983, a period when investors and business people were wary of spending their hard-earned money in floating new businesses. The economic crisis that faced the nation in 1983 revealed the attendant problems of economic management and adjustment under conditions characterized by numerous uncertainties and fairly rapid changes. The problem has been described succinctly by Terry Lynn Karl, in his work entitled, *The Paradox of Plenty:*

…Currency appreciation and domestic inflation made local industries uncompetitive internationally and boosted imports, leading to balance of payments difficulties during oil-induced recessions in 1978-79 and from 1981 until the early 1990s. Expenditure rapidly outpaced income, and, with oil price slumps in the early 1980s, external debt more than doubled from 1980 to 1985. The oil price fell from around U.S. $32 per barrel in 1981 to approximately U.S. $13 per barrel in 1986, and Nigeria’s gross national product (GNP) fell from a high of U.S. $99,539 million in 1980 to a low of U.S. $24,341 million in 1987. In the same year, the ratio of debt to GNP reached 112.8 percent.
The climate was definitely not good for investment. It was in reaction to the problems thrown up by the period that General Ibrahim Babangida’s administration declared an Economic emergency in 1985 followed by the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme.\textsuperscript{11} It was in this climate of uncertainty that the airline was established. The airline, which had its headquarters in Benin operated with the ICAO code: OKJ and IATA code: 9H. Okada air became the biggest privately owned airline in the country. It greatly popularized air travel in the country in the 1980s and 1990s. On its fleet were over 40 aircrafts such as BAC 1-11s and B727s including the Executive Jet formerly owned by one-time Phillippino president, Ferdinand Marcos. The major principle that ennobled the airline throughout its career was clearly adumbrated by Chief Igbinedion:

New standards of reliability have since been set by Okada Air… Okada Air’s orientation revolves around efficiency, safety, and profitability. We will maintain our lead in this respect and intend to sustain our very high standards of passenger safety, comfort and care. Our service will continually reflect the motto: Keeping Faith with the Flying Public.\textsuperscript{12}

Although the airline has been rested, its image as a well run and dependable airline lives on. This much was revealed in an airline forum on the World-Wide-Web. A contributor to the forum who simply signed himself in as “Charles, SJ”, in responding to a question from a United Kingdom based contributor who was asking what happened to the airline, had responded vide a message posted on Monday, November 29, 2004:

Okada Air was in operation at least up through 1996, as I flew them several times during the year I spent in Nigeria. They were primarily a domestic airline who also did charters for the Hajj, and also was seeking rights to fly between LOS and LGW. It was owned by a Nigerian businessman who hired me to run his hospital about 60KM outside Benin City. I think the airline collapsed around 1997-98. On the upside, it was one of the better run airlines in Nigeria. The aircraft were safe, had a good safety record, and did attempt to provide a western style of service.\textsuperscript{13}
This, no doubt is words on marble. Records available on the net indicated that in its years of operation it recorded only three accidents- a remarkable record when compared with the records of airlines that came on board in the years when the economy had picked up. Okada Air kept faith with its customers throughout its existence.

To show how shrewd he was as a businessman, he broadened the scope of his businesses to include Radio and Television broadcasting and tourism. In addition, the business empire grew to include an international property portfolio, soft drink production, a large number of hotels, a private bank, oil refinery, diamond, gold, and marble mines all over the African continent.14

**Okada: Cultural and sub-Cultural Appropriations**

Let us look at the cultural and sub-cultural appropriations of some of the creations of the Chief. The word ‘Okada’ burst into national consciousness of people with the arrival of Okada Air. By looking at cultural and sub-cultural appropriations of the word, it allows us to assess the impact that the name has had on groups and individuals whose access to other means of transportation was either limited or strategic. It became appropriated and has now become a household word. Now, majority of Nigerians refer to commercial motorcycles as ‘Okada.’ Let us for once quickly borrow some material from *Wikipedia*, the free online (although unverified) encyclopedia to see what has been written about *Okada*, the motorcycle:

Okada (also: achaba, going, inaga) refers to commercial motorcycles used as vehicles for hire in Nigeria. The name Okada was borrowed from Okada Air, a now defunct local airline in Nigeria. Okada Air was a local Nigerian airline [and]...remained the most used local airline in the country. The name was used as a nickname for the motorcycle transporters, because they could maneuver between the heavy traffic of Lagos and take you to your destination in time, just
as Okada Airline did. Because of the comic irony of this name being used for a cyclist and for the popularity of the airline, the name Okada for the commercial motorcyclist was never to be forgotten and eventually became as popular as it is now…

Three things are immediately clear. First, Okada the motorcycle derived its name from the Chief Igbinedion’s initiative. Secondly, it is something that gets you somewhere and everywhere - highly functional. And the conclusion? Chief Igbinedion has created an identity- powered by the name of the town that gave life and nurture to him. The upshot is that this town has become one of the most prominent towns in Nigeria. It can only trail behind Lagos and Abuja in prominence and popularity now.

**Igbinedion University: An Intellectual Heritage**

Education is central to sustainable growth and development anywhere in the world. By the developed world. From the United States to Europe and the newly industrializing countries, education remains a significant tool of progress. Anyone who recognized the basic contributions of education to development is no doubt a great mind. The establishment of various educational institutions has shown a remarkable side of this illustrious son of Okada. In the town, he developed a comprehensive institute for kindergarten, primary and secondary schools before capping it with the establishment of the Igbinedion University. Chief Igbinedion, recognizing the importance of ideas in the development of any society used his hard-earned money to establish a fantastic citadel of learning that has gone ahead to enhance the quality of education in this country.

The Igbinedion University is the first private university in Nigeria. It was established in 1999 and has as its motto, *Knowledge and Excellence*. The establishment of the Igbinedion University was predicated on the ideals of learning, research and
practical application in development. The process of capacity building is unique as a centre of knowledge and manpower production rather that the old strategy of education for certificates.

The Man of Culture

The “godfather of the people”, that is the meaning of the traditional title he held as the Esama of Benin Kingdom. This was not a mean title. While a full discussion of the power relations in the Benin Kingdom is not the focus of this paper, it is nevertheless important to understand how tradition, custom, culture and enterprise have coalesced to create out of Chief Igbinedion an influential player in Benin politics and society. As a key player in the tradition and customs of his people, he ‘lived’ the title as he was in truth and in deed the godfather of his people as he went on to assist the poor in medical and monetary terms and by helping them in setting up private ventures.

Conclusion: The Future of his Biceps

In the aftermath of the American Revolution and the inauguration of the new American nation, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, in lauding the role and significance of the United States in world history believed he had seen something greater and more significant than the birth of a new nation. As he surveyed the new nation, in awe, he proclaimed: ‘in America I saw more than America.’ In the same vein, after having surveyed the life and achievements of Chief Igbinedion, I should be allowed to paraphrase de Tocqueville: ‘in Chief Igbinedion I saw more than Chief Igbinedion’! Chief Igbinedion can aptly be described as a hero in history- that is if we define the term as a person, endowed with extra-ordinary qualities of heart and mind. To me, one his
greatest achievements, is his capacity to create a real sense of community while at the same time being a global player. Genuine progress can only take place in an atmosphere of peace and a profound appreciation of men and women of industry who in one way or another have dedicated their entire lives to creativity and enterprise.

Thus, instead of focusing on our great people as agents of progress, our government by their ineptitude has pitted us against them instead of appreciating them. As a man of stature, what remains for Chief Igbinedion is to help us change our system of values as a people. This is because it is dangerous to bequeath these enormous resources to posterity without a corresponding development of structures to inculcate in our people, enduring ideas, values, and norms— all of which together play important roles in creating the total man.

I shall end this piece by asking the following questions. Do the Edo people actually realize that they have the tools and the necessary wherewithal to help Nigeria to create the total man? Do we realize that just like the state, the individual also remains a principal actor in helping to create and establish more firmly a conscious mind that is at once creative and progressive? The answer of course lies in the understanding of what I will call the Edo ‘agency’. The Chinese now go about the world creating the Confucius Institute. The Bini should also be ready to become more visible globally. Moving beyond the Queen Idia image, Benin’s stature will rise higher, once a conscious effort is made by men of stature like Chief Igbinedion to stamp the Bini consciousness more forcefully on the firmament. We need a cultural revolution. The Edo with an old and profound civilization have the capacity to create the ‘Edo Institute’ as a tool not only for advancing the knowledge and understanding of a very proud culture but also as a tool of national
and sustainable development. It is high time the dominant elite in our society began to take interest in the cultural health of the people. If the interests and policies of states are determined by the elite, they must also begin to take interest in creating an enduring legacy in the socio-cultural realm.

Endnotes

8 “Igbinedion Hospital and Medical Research Centre” Available at [http://Igbinedion.net/ihmrc.htm](http://Igbinedion.net/ihmrc.htm) Accessed on August 15, 2011.
Profile of the Guest Speaker

Professor Olutayo Charles Adesina was educated at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, where he earned his B.A (Hons.), M.A. and Ph.D degrees in History. In 1993, he joined the staff of the Department of History, University of Ibadan where he currently teaches courses on Nigerian history, Economic History of West Africa, and the History of Development. Prof. Adesina has authored several books and journal articles. He is Guest Editor of the *Journal of Global Initiatives* (Special Edition, Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA., Vol.3 No.2, 2008). He is also co-editor of *Globalization and Transnational Migrations: Africa and Africans in the Contemporary Global System* (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K., 2009) and, *Marginality and Crisis: Globalization and Identity in Contemporary Africa* (Maryland, U.S.A., Lexington Books, 2010).

Prof. Adesina has been privileged to head the prestigious Ibadan School of History, University of Ibadan. He has held many distinguished academic fellowships, including the United States Information Agency’s (USIA) International Visitors Fellowship, Boston College, U.S.A (1994), Atlantic History Seminar fellowship, Charles Warren Center, Harvard University, U.S.A (1998) and, the fellowship of the prestigious Salzburg Seminar, Austria, (2001). In 2004/2005, he was the African Visiting Fellow, Rhodes Chair of Race Relations at St. Antony’s College, Oxford University, U.K., and in 2009 he was a Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Prof. Adesina is currently completing a book-length manuscript on *Development: Concepts and Realities in the Third World.*
Just an old man to nod to in the street or smile through a politely held library door. The dream rejuvenated him, transformed him from boneless, liver-spotted old beardy into Mack Sennett barman with drooping black mustache tacked to a face hangdog long and white with undernourishment. His face, for all that. How do you find the distance and the cool to write in an academically approved style about something that makes you spin, wobble and weep? I remember that child in the Dickens novel, Hard Times I think it is, the girl who had grown up with carnival people, spending her days with horses, tending them, feeding them, training them and loving them. Roman men also painted their heads to camouflage bald spots although we're not sure how well that would have worked. Elizabethan England. Frock Flicks. During Queen Elizabeth I's rule, makeup was wildly popular among men, who valued ghost-white powdered skin. This was also when face makeup was dangerously caky and made with lead, which often caused serious health problems, including but not limited to premature death. 18th-Century France. Bigli.com. (Thanks, Queen Victoria I.) But with the arrival of modern movie-making in the United States, hair and makeup for men reemerged. Clark Gable's polished look was perhaps the first example of "metrosexual" beauty. 1970s & 1980s. A person can make history by contributing to society in a significant way by creating new policies that will help the citizens of the country, by creating a new invention that will improve our way of life, by showing compassion to others through charity work, and so on. One person that ultimately comes to mind is Martin Luther King Jr. Our country was separated by race and this one man who was not even a politician created this amazing change for our country. He was able to bring many races together and fight for the equal rights for all. This one man changed the way America viewed the diversit