

OKPE: REBIRTH OF A NATION

A KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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By

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AT THE

1ST OKPE WORLD CONFERENCE

ORGANIZED BY

THE OKPE VOICE (NORTH AMERICA, EUROPE AND NIGERIA)

AT THE

OKPE HALL

SAPELE, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

NOVEMBER 17 – 19, 2006

Umogun, Umogun, Umogun
Your Royal Majesty, Orhue I, the Orodje of Okpe Kingdom

Hon. Chief P. A. Gbinije, the Senior Okakuro of Okpe Kingdom
Senator Chief David O. Dafinone, the Ogwere 1 of Okpe Kingdom
Respected Chiefs and Elders of Okpe Kingdom
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with profound pride and honour that I accept to deliver this Keynote Address at the 1st OKPE WORLD CONFERENCE holding here in Urhiapele. It is an honour for me to deliver this address, because of the trust that my colleagues on the Editorial Board of OKPE VOICE have in me. I will try to do justice to both imperatives and to the Okpe Nation. On behalf of the Editorial Board of OKPE VOICE, I welcome you to this historic conference.

It is our collective pride and honour that this conference is taking place with HRM Orhue I, the Orodje of Okpe Kingdom as the Special Guest of Honour. The coronation of HRM Orhue I marked a watershed in Okpe History, a new beginning for us Okpe to re-dedicate ourselves to peace and development in Okpeland. We congratulate HRM Orhue I on his accession to the throne. This gathering of eminent Okpe men and women is taking place at a crucial stage in the history of Nigeria, as various ethnic nationalities in the country are grappling with the fundamental issue of how to restructure Nigerian federalism with a constitutional role for them. Okpe must not be excluded from this process.

At the reception/dinner last night, November 17, my colleague Dr. Hope Eghagha the chair of the National Organizing Committee of the conference, welcomed you all to this historic occasion. I share his sentiments. I join him in thanking Chief David O. Dafinone for sponsoring the event, as well as for facilitating the holding of this conference in Okpe Hall, a befitting venue for Okpe to meet and deliberate on the future strategic directions of the Okpe Nation. That this conference is holding at all can be considered a success. But the fruits of that success will depend on our resolutions and communiqué regarding the place of Okpe in Delta State, and in Nigeria. It is anticipated that this conference will put to rest forever the sarcastic saying that “**Okpe a mę rhen**”, (“*Okpe are asleep*,”) a sarcasm which has hurt the consciousness of the Okpe in so many ways. At the end of this conference, it is our hope and prayer that we can now declare proudly that **Okpe i rhọ-mọn nẹ** (Okpe have awakened) to define itself as a distinct, viable and vibrant ethnic nationality taking its rightful place among the collectives of Nigerian ethnic nationalities.

When I look across this great audience, I see one big Okpe family, the off springs of the brothers Orhue, Orhoro, Evbreke, and Esezi, the children of Prince Okpe and grandchildren of Prince Igboze. Though the enthusiasm that ushered in Esezi 1 as the first Orodje of Okpe was short-lived, and the Okpe Kingdom plunged into a prolonged interregnum of almost 300 years, it is a remarkable feat of the Okpe spirit that,

irrespective of this long period, the four founding ruling houses of the Okpe Kingdom did not fragment into separate kingdoms. The proud salutation of *Okpe Agbamini* succinctly describes this period of Okpe History.

When I look across this great audience, I see one big Okpe family whose members have established respective family relations by marriage to non Okpe across the ethnic divide of Nigeria, as well as with non Nigerian nationals from other countries. This inter-ethnic and international dimension of the Okpe demonstrates the resiliency of the Okpe, and it must be harnessed to promote the Okpe language, history and culture.

When our forefathers established the Okpe Kingdom, they did not establish it as an appendage of any other ethnic nationality. They were persuaded by the imperatives to protect Okpe's distinct nationality. Okpe is distinct and independent. But this distinctiveness and independence that was handed to us by our forefathers, Orhue, Orhoro, Evbreke, and Ezezi, must be jealously guarded by all of us. While it is true that we share cultural and historical affiliations with our neighbours in Delta and Edo states, it is also true that we each retain specific characteristics to our respective identities. In the contours of Nigerian politics endogenous and exogenous forces have conspired to diminish our consciousness as Okpe. While an Okpe proudly declares his identity by saying "me y'okpe" (I am an Okpe), he, at the same time, agonizes over the state fiat that seems to compromise Okpe consciousness. This phenomenon is not unique to the Okpe. But we must strive to create an enabling environment to awaken Okpe consciousness. The rebirth of the Okpe Nation is a product of that consciousness.

OKPE VOICE is committed to the rebirth of the Okpe Nation. As an organization of Okpe nationals dedicated to the promotion and defence of Okpe interests in Nigeria and in the international arena, OKPE VOICE maintains a website (<http://www.okpenation.org>) that positions Okpe in cyberspace. Its motto, *Serving the Okpe Nation* vividly captures its being. Since its inception in May 2005, OKPE VOICE has contributed to the renaissance of Okpe consciousness. But the realisation of this noble objective depends on the collective will of the Okpe leadership and the Okpe people, a cross section of which is represented in this historic conference. To achieve this objective, however, we must be prepared to lose a part of us, a part of us that has been a hindrance to our success as a Nation. Thus, to win, we must be prepared to lose.

We need inspired leadership based on a defined vision to lead Okpe. The Orodje stands at the apex of this leadership. But being an Orodje is not the only leadership position there is in Okpeland. In fact, you do not need to occupy an elective or an appointive position to demonstrate your leadership. Each of us is an Okpe leader in as much as we render services to the development of Okpeland. As Senator Chief David O. Dafinone once said: "To lead, be prepared to pay to serve your community." A respected British Field Marshall, Bernard Montgomery had this to say about leadership: "Leadership is the capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose and the character which inspires confidence." Let us employ our leadership skills to rally Okpe men and women,

our youth and elders, to a common purpose of service to Okpe. Let us be prepared to make personal sacrifices that will benefit Okpe.

This conference will build on the successes of past gatherings and laudable initiatives of Okpe leaders whose services and contributions to Okpeland paved the way for us to be here today. We are here because they were there. Our task at this conference is to advance the frontiers of services and contributions to the development of Okpeland. We need to critically examine our being. What does it mean to be an Okpe? In fact, who is an Okpe? What is our identity as Okpe? How do we define ourselves and project and defend our Okpeness? How do we develop Okpeland? These are some of the topical issues that this conference is called upon to grapple with. Education plays a pivotal role in this process. Towards this end, you will be called upon at this conference to consider the establishment of the following institutions.

- Okpe Postgraduate Scholarship Fund

The Okpe Postgraduate Scholarship Fund will compliment the Okpe Undergraduate Scholarship Fund already launched by the Okpe Union of North America. The idea of an Okpe Postgraduate Scholarship Fund was compelled by the need to fill a major gap in Okpe's educational development. The Fund will be launched at this Conference by Chief Charles Obule. It will provide partial and full scholarships for qualified Okpe sons and daughters to enable them pursue their post-graduate studies in several disciplines, including Agriculture, Economics, Engineering, History, Law, Medicine, Okpe Language, Political Science, etc.

- Okpe Research Council

We call for the establishment of an Okpe Research Council as an imperative instrument for the development of scholarship and research by Okpe nationals. The proposed Okpe Research Council will provide research and publication grants for Okpe scholars to undertake socio-economic and scientific research in various fields of study that will benefit and enhance the development of Okpe. Though not listed in the conference agenda, we plan to raise this issue during the Okpe General Meeting that will be chaired by Senator Chief David O. Dafinone.

- Institute for Okpe Studies

The idea of establishing an Institute for Okpe Studies was contained in **The State of the Okpe Kingdom** memorandum that we sent to Okpe leaders on February 19, 2006. If established, the Institute will be a research and study centre specifically for Okpe History, Language, and Culture. It will also house the secretariat of the Okpe Research Council.

The establishment and funding of the above institutions will significantly contribute to the growth and development of Okpeland.

Once again, I welcome you to this conference, and wish you God's guidance in our deliberations..

God bless the Okpe Kingdom.
God bless the Orodje of Okpe.

Umogun, Umogun, Umogun.