**We are not Orphans, We have Fathers.**

*Lecture by Owei Lakemfa at   the 25th Alhaji Sule Oyesola Gbadamosi (SOG)  Memorial Lecture,  Ikorodu Town Hall, Ikorodu, Lagos on Monday  5th February, 2018.*

PROTOCOLS.

I am honoured to have been invited to give this lecture on one of the builders of our country who left a legacy of service, initiative, hard work, dedication and  loyalty. A matchless patriot and a unique  Pan-Africanist  who from colonial times taught us that we are not inferior to the Whiteman and that with painstaking planning, hard work and perseverance, we can build a first class country.

Nigeria is said to be in search of an Agenda. But we seek what we have, and search for what is not missing.  Contained in  the life and times of Alhaji Sule Oyesola Gbadamosi (SOG) OFR and the Otun of Ikorodu, is a viable Agenda for our country.

For decades now, we have debated Restructuring, and today, our country can be said to be split over it, and  what it means. Yet our Founding Fathers like SOG who negotiated our Independence and Future at the London Constitutional Conferences, had in place, a  Restructured country based on Federalism with separation powers between  the federating blocs and the centre.

Today, there are horrendous massacres in the country by rampaging criminal gangs clothed as ‘herdsmen’ If we had continued in the tradition of SOG and his fellow leaders in the then ruling Action Group in the West, by now, we would have had ranches and there would be no so called “Herdsmen-Farmers Communal Clashes” Before independence, they knew ranching was it and  established a huge one in the West as the beginning of a new culture.

Distinguished personalities, Ladies and Gentlemen, I was for decades a Trade Unionist, and in the Labour Movement, we had slogans like “If You Can Read, Thank Your Teacher!” “If You Can Write, Thank Your Teacher!!” “If You Can Read and Write, Thank Your Teacher!!!” That is why before I proceed further, I  need to thank Mrs. Tinu Gbadamosi, wife of Chief Rasheed Abiodun Gbadamosi, one of the sons of SOG who taught me at the Methodist Boys’ High School (MBHS)  Lagos.

**What SOG taught us about Religion and Politics.**

SOG was one of the leading Muslims of his day. He was known for his benevolence towards Islamic movements in general. A very religious person, he observed the five times daily prayer injunction and when many years later, old age could not allow him bend down, he would sit on a stool and say his five times a day prayer. He  went on his first pilgrimage to Mecca in 1940 and went a few times more. He had a mosque built as annex to his Ikorodu home. He donated land and funded the Jamat-ul- Islamiyya Division One Mosque in Ikorodu.

Despite his high standing in the Muslim Community, he did not only send one of his sons, Rasheed Abiodun  Gbadamosi to the Christian Mission School, the MBHS,  Lagos, but also  asked the Principal, the Reverend S.A. Osinulu to take him  in as part of his household. For the five years he spent at MBHS, Chief Rasheed Gbadamosi lived in the household of Reverend Osinulu. This shows the high enlightenment of SOG;  his open-heartedness and tolerance.

He respected other religions and people’s sensibilities. Apart from attending the obligatory Quoranic School, he  himself  had attended Christian Mission Schools, like the CMS Primary School, Ebute Ero, Lagos   and the Baptist  Academy,  Lagos. When occasions demanded, he accompanied his friends and associates to church functions. Apart from funding Muslim groups, he also donated to churches.

SOG demonstrated  in practice that we are all human beings irrespective of our religious inclinations and that we cannot run our politics and governance based on religious discrimination. To him, secularity was a given.

When in 1957 some Muslim groups decided to introduce religion into politics by forming an Islamic party, SOG was emphatic that it was injurious to the political health of the country.

In order to exploit this situation for political purposes, a number of Muslim groups founded in July 1957, a political party called the National Muslim League (Egbe Musulumi Apapo) Many of the founders came from the Muslim Welfare Association.

SOG and some Muslims got together to counter this development and encourage secular politics. They formed a group called the United Muslim Council. Leading members of this Council included Alhaji D.S. Adegbenro, who later became the Premier of the Western Region, Prince .A.  Adedamola  AG leader in Abeokuta, Alhaji Yekini Ojikutu, Member of the Lagos Town Council, Alhaji A. T Awelenje who was the Council President –General, and SOG. They succeeded in check mating the sectional party.

The SOG generation did not permit religious cleavages. In the Second Republic, when the AG transformed into the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) it did not allow religious considerations to decide  who led  the people. It actually had two persons from the same religion as  Governor and Deputy Governor in the states they controlled. In  Lagos State, they  had two Muslims, Alhaji Lateef Jakande and Alhaji Rafiu Jafojo as Governor and Deputy Governor, in Oyo State , they  two Christians, Chief Bola Ige and Sunday Afolabi, as were Chiefs Adekunle Ajasin and Akin Omoboriowo in Ondo State. In Ogun State, there were   Chiefs Victor Olabisi Onabanjo and Sesan Soluade, who later became the Agbaakin of Egba Christians. Had we continued in the SOG culture, our country might have experienced  less contentious  and fragmentary politics.

**The industrialist as Anti-Colonialist and Nation Builder.**

SOG became a businessman at 25 in 1935 when with his cousin, Alhaji Rabiu. A. Alison he established  the Ikorodu Trading Company (ITC)  For the next six decades, he represented the best tradition in African Business and Industrialization. But he was not just a trader. Although he had political weight in the country and was a personal friend of both the Finance Minister, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh  and the Prime Minster, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa-Balewa, he was not a portfolio businessman seeking contracts. He was an industrialist who liked producing things you can hold and sell. Much more than that, in the colonial days, he saw things not just as Nigeria fighting to be free of Britain both politically and economically, but as a struggle between Africans and the Whiteman. People like him, utilized inter-European divisions and rivalries to advance their economic interests and those  of their country  and the Black Race. They also reached out to other Non-European  nations to undermine the British. For instance, SOG imported German goods to fight British monopoly. He established a garment factory on Adeniji Adele Street, Lagos using fabrics from  Germany   and Japan. Then the British transnational, the United African Company (UAC)  went into garment manufacturing and produced cheaper garments to under sell the SOG garments. Rather than back away, he  imported Japanese machines to produce cheaper under wears than those UAC sold. He won the price war and eventually, bought out the UAC garment factory.

There was another war he fought against colonial British monopoly. It was a capitalist system and capital was needed to successfully run business, but the  banks, like the Bank of British West Africa,  and Barclays  Bank,   primarily, rendered services to European companies  and the colonial government, not to local business.

Three   noted nationalists; Dr. Akinola Maja, Mr. H.A. Subair and Mr. T.  Adebayo Doherty decided that the solution was to create a local bank that would grow local business and economy. So they incorporated  the National Bank in 1933. All the founders  were to join the Action Group party in the 1950s. SOG teamed up  with them, invested in the bank and eventually became one of its Directors.

To encourage the National Bank and its efforts to break colonial monopoly in banking, the Western Region Government by 1955, deposited  forty five percent of its funds in the bank while one of its agencies, the Western Region Marketing Board invested One Million pounds to buy shares in it.

The Western Region government was controlled by the Action Group  and its Premier, Chief Obafemi Awolowo declared that “giving financial assistance to indigenous banks so that they may be able to provide credit facilities to the Nigerian businessman” is a settled policy of Government.

 However, the opposition National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) party in the region decided to bring a motion to the Western House of Assembly for a Colonial Royal Commission of Inquiry into the policies and work of the Western Region Government including its relationship with the National Bank.  This was despite the fact that the Zik Press, owned by NCNC  national leader,  Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was a shareholder in the bank. SOG as a parliamentarian joined in the fight to defeat the motion. He had told the parliament “Any person who has Nigerian blood in his veins must join forces with any organisation which is out to help our businessmen today to regain their lost position…The National Bank of Nigeria Limited as the leading bank, 100 percent controlled by Nigerians, has dedicated its life to this national struggle”

When one of SOG’s friends, Dr. Akinola Maja went to England in 1948, he noticed  that the ceramic wares he saw  were produced with materials from Nigeria. He also read that clay was in abundance in Abeokuta. The practical SOG went into partnership with Maja and Alhaji  Rabiu Alison.  It was not a good investment but the partners learnt good business lessons on  how to handle success  and failure.

Perhaps the biggest business enterprise SOG was involved in was the National Investment and Properties Company (NIPC) It was  established in 1958 by  leading nationalists from the Action Group; Dr. Akinola Maja, S.O.Sonibare, Alfred Rewane and SOG,  the Lion of Ikorodu. The four directors were running the company on behalf of the Action Group. They were into building and management of estates.

The Company built such historical monuments in Lagos and Ibadan as the Western House, and Investment House. Unlike the elites in Nigeria today whose aim is to sell public enterprises to themselves and strip their assets for personal gains, the SOG generation was selfless and patriotic. They were not prodigals who sold national wealth, rather, they were builders who even under the capitalist ideology, believed  that  private and public enterprises have their usefulness and relevance to the people and should therefore engage in healthy competition.

It may well be noted that their patriotism and integrity was rudely put on trial during the Action Group crisis of 1962 after the Coker Commission was set up to probe the affairs of the Company. All four directors were afraid that the Federal Government and Akintola's Regional Government would seize the company if it was known that it was owned by the Action Group. So they wanted to hide the true ownership of the company. Chief Awolowo, as revealed in his book, **Travails of Democracy and the rule of law,** warned them to tell the whole truth even if the Federal Government, in a bid to destroy the Action Group, would seize the company. But the directors had already deposed that they were the owners of the company. This became the  source of controversy that still rings a bell when the finance of political parties is discussed today. The truth is that, apart from being a party based on individual membership subscription, the Action Group almost resolved the question of party finance, by having a company, the NIPC, which could  make money on its own for financing political campaigns. How successful it could have been can be imagined from the current value of Odu'a Investments, which was what the company became after its assets were seized by the government.

After the NIPC approach to party finance was destroyed by the ruling coalitions of the day, SOG, together with Alfred Rewane, and others remained unbending financiers of the Action Group and any political party with which Awolowo was associated.

SOG had risen from the depths of poverty to the heights of riches in the country; from being a petty trader he had become one of the biggest industrialists in the country’s history. He was a father of industrialization and indigenization.

**The Politics that defined Nigeria.**

SOG was a man of conscience. He detested and rejected racism. His participation in politics and the political life of our country was not accidental. It was a logical progression of his own politics; his belief and fight for a just and egalitarian society.

 When the  Europeans  who dominated the then leading social association, the Ikoyi Club  and consistently  claimed racial superiority over Nigerians, he was one of the fifty members who in 1943, pulled out to found a new association, the Island Club.

On November 18, 1948, the British colonial police shot dead 21 striking coal miners and injured 55 others. This  criminal act became known as ‘The Iva Valley Massacre’. Before then, there was no collective consciousness that the different peoples and nationalities of Nigeria were one country; it was this event that spread that consciousness as the country rose as one in condemnation and demanding justice. The success of that mass movement of Nigerians led by eighteen leading Nigerians including SOG,  who formed the National Emergency Committee (NEC) convinced Nigerians that united, they can win.

One year before the Iva Valley Massacre, SOG had joined other elites in Western Nigeria to found the  Pan Yoruba socio-cultural  movement, Egbe Omo Oduduwa in the country. Earlier, the Egbe had been founded in London in 1945 by men like Dr. Oni Akerele who was its President, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, SOG’s former teacher and friend, and  Obafemi Awolowo who was its Secretary.

That 1948 when  the Egbe was established in Nigeria, a women uprising led by a teacher, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the President General of the Women’s Union, had forced  the Alake of Egbaland, Oba Ademola  to abdicate and go into exile to Oshogbo. The women protest was against women paying taxes and the powers of the Alake which they considered as excessive.  The Egbe intervened; it sent SOG and Akintola to meet Oba Ademola and agitated that the monarch should be recalled because taxes were  collected by the colonial administration not the monarch. The  Egba Central Council agreed with the submission and the colonial authorities allowed the Alake to return to his palace.

Chief Awolowo, the General Secretary of the Egbe, initiated moves to establish a political party. Thus the Action Group (AG) was born  in Owo on April 28, 1951 with SOG as one of its founders. Its motto was “Life More Abundant, Freedom For All” Its programme  included free education for all children, local economic and rural development. SOG was to espouse his philosophy and why he joined the party: “I am a Welfarist and to have peace in this country, the underdogs must be remembered; you must create an egalitarian society. Any rich man who is insensitive to the living conditions of the people around him is only digging his grave.”

Nigeria ran a West Minister system of government. The departing colonialists organised  pre-independence general elections to determine the  government it would hand over the reins of government. In the elections, the Action Group won thirty-three seats in the Western Region, twenty-five in the North, fourteen in the East and one in the Lagos Crown Colony.

In comparison, the NCNC won fifty eight seats in the East, twenty one in the West, eighteen in the North and two in Lagos. The Northern People’s   Congress (NPC) which had the majority seats of one hundred and forty two, won all, except one in the North. The exception was the seat in the Brass Division won by NPC ally, the Niger Delta Congress (NDC).

It was this result that produced one of the biggest ‘Ifs” in Nigerian politics. The Action Group believed that the best option for  Nigeria was  an AG-NCNC alliance to form government with the NPC being the opposition. SOG was sent to work out this alliance with NCNC leader, Dr. Azikiwe who was offered the position of Prime Minister with Awolowo as Finance Minister.  After three days waiting on Azikiwe, SOG failed because the former worked out an alliance with the NPC and agreed to be President, which was a largely ceremonial position rather than become the  Prime Minister of the new country.  That NPC-NCNC alliance was to back Akintola to remain as   Premier of the Western Region against the wishes of the AG which led to the calamitous uprising in the Western Region called ‘Wetie” This quite bloody “Wild, Wild West’ conflict, was to lead to the 1966 military coup and then the three-year Civil War which left over two million dead. It is a matter of conjecture if Nigeria would have been a different country had SOG succeeded in his mission to forge an AG-NCNC alliance and post-independence government.

**Blessed are the peace makers.**

There were several contentious issues after independence with potentials of setting the country on fire. One of them was state creation and the right of the provinces to join regions of their choice rather than  be forced to remain in a particular region. The NPC had vehemently   opposed this at the 1957 Constitution Conference. With the country making no headway on this, SOG called an informal all-parties meeting in his house in Ikorodu. It was well attended with Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa personally leading the ruling NPC Delegation.

The rather informal meeting surprisingly secured a resolution. It was agreed that any ethnic group within an existing region can join a neighboring region if the majority of such ethnic group desire it and provided that the region it sought to join, is willingly to accept it. This meant that the Ilorin and Kabba provinces in the North could realize their aspirations to join the West.  The lesson for today’s politics, is that we do not need to dig in and try to impose our views  on others. Rather, we should be open to dialogue and be willing to accommodate the interests of others.

SOG, a liberal organizer also used his negotiating  skills and sense of social justice to ensure peace in the AG. For instance, in March 1958, there was a serious crisis in  Ishara, Ijebu Division, a stronghold  of the party where factional groups had emerged and nominated rival candidates in ten wards.

The Election Committee had been unable to resolve the disputes so also could the local party elders not find a solution. So the AG asked SOG to sort out the problem. Political Scientist Richard L. Sklar witnessed the settlement process. He wrote in his book, **Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation**: “The Federal Treasurer, Alhaji S.O Gbadamosi, MHA who was assigned to settle the dispute called a mass meeting in every ward and utilized the official electoral register to call out names and separate the supporters of rival candidates physically who were then counted. The candidates with the greater number of supporters were declared the official Action Group nominees, AG candidates were returned unopposed in every ward but one where an independent stood and was defeated”

There was however a conflict he could not solve; that between his two friends and political allies; Awolowo and Akintola, the leader and deputy leader  of the AG. In February 1962, at its Annual Congress in Jos, the party adopted Democratic Socialism as its ideology, proclaimed party supremacy and scrapped the post of Deputy Leader held by Akintola. With the battle lines drawn, a meeting of the AG’s  Federal Executive Council was summoned to try Akintola for alleged anti-party activities. The meeting after a six-hour deliberation found Akintola guilty. After this, Anthony Enahoro moved a motion that Akintola resigns as Premier of the Western Region. SOG, sought a middle ground, he  moved an amendment that Akintola be reprimanded but should remain as Premier. His argument was that the issues in contention need to be   peacefully resolved. The SOG amendment was taken as a counter motion. The House took a vote, the motion that Akintola resigns got eighty-one votes while SOG’s motion had twenty-seven votes. With the defeat of SOG’s motion, peace was defeated in the Western Region; moderation had failed, good sense had not been allowed to prevail, and the consequences were chaos, bloodshed and imprisonment while death came to not a few including some of the participants.

As the political conflict assumed national dimensions, Awolowo was tried for  corruption, and eventually for treason. SOG was torn between two friends but although he appeared closer to Akintola, he resolved the matter based on principles.  Awolowo was to say: “Akintola … tried to get Alhaji Gbadamosi to give evidence against me. The Western Region Finance Corporation had obtained judgement to recover 200, 000 pounds from Gbadamosi. They told him that if he gave evidence against me, the debt would be written off. Gbadamosi told them, you want me to testify against a friend about something I know nothing about  and after swearing on the Koran? You can sell all my property, you can sell me in addition. I am not going to testify”

SOG also got pressures from the Federal Government with an offer to sell to him exclusively, all smuggled  goods seized by the Customs and Excise. He declined this and a subsequent offer from a friend and founder of a bank. He sent a message back to the Prime Minister: “No,  I am not going to be used. Kill me, kill my business. Whatever you like  do, I am old enough to die” At that time SOG was just fifty seven years old.

**Conclusion**.

SOG taught us to be tolerant and accommodate other views and beliefs. He helped  build the culture of industrialization people like Razak Akanni Okoya (Elganza) and Samuel Adedoyin (Doyin Group of Companies) have further built on. SOG and his comrades taught us that political parties are built with the people not for the people, and that it has to be funded by the people who pay membership dues not the new culture where political parties pay members even to attend party meetings and rallies. He taught Nigerians that political parties should be people-oriented movements where people of like minds converge to seek power for the welfare of the citizenry. Not, as they are today,  mainly political platforms to contest elections for personal gains and advancement. That was why unlike many  politicians today,  he was not a nomadic   politician belonging to the All Peoples Party at dawn,   the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) in the morning, the Congress Party at noon, back to the PDP in the evening and the All Peoples Congress at night, and may wake up in another political party the next day.

I congratulate the Gbadamosi family for their worthy pedigree. SOG taught his children to be contended and place high value on integrity, sincerity and loyalty. He taught them the abiding preferences to do good to anybody and everybody. He would always say, “If anybody comes for any help, don’t turn him back, do the little you can.”

 I also congratulate the rest of us for we are political sons and daughters of SOG and other builders of modern Nigeria. We never lacked heroes and heroines. Nigerians were never orphans; we had fathers and mothers like SOG who strived to build a solid socio-economic and political foundation for Nigeria our dear native land. SOG played his part well; it is left for us to emulate him. Thank you.