

**THEY CRAWLED SO WE COULD WALK: IMPERATIVE OF
INTER-GENERATIONAL DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA**



**Text of a Convocation Lecture Delivered by Bishop
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Every nation considers nation building a work in progress, a shared vision of greatness, conceived and articulated by those who have gone before. Every nation has a solid foundation on which rugged pillars and scaffoldings stand to hold their dreams together. National anthems, Art, Theatre, History, Culture are often drawn from a hymnbook of supplications, invocations for divine inspiration to keep these dreams and hopes alive. As such, the hymnology often invokes notions of aspirations, visions, sacrifices of these heroes and heroines. They may have died in the battle fields for freedom or in the prisons constructed by the conquerors of yesterday. Still, their memories are invoked in solemn supplications.

American history cannot be complete without reference to heroes like General Paton, Ulysses Grant, George Washington, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, etc. Ho Chi Min city is named after the great eponymous freedom fighter who gave North Vietnam its freedom. The mention of such men as Mao Zedong or Deng Hsiao Ping, Lenin, Stalin, Castro, Mandela or Lee Kwan Yew, inspires their citizens to sacrifice and awe. The lives of these great men are embedded in the histories and myths of their nations. Their memories are summoned as witnesses to the imperative of patriotism or when their nations are threatened.

The stories of their years of humiliation, subjugation, imprisonment or death often become seared into the collective memory by way of folklore, drama and theatre. The complex scars of their individual or collective sufferings are held up as a kaleidoscopic scenery of adoration and even worship by generations. This is often a function of identity construction and mythology. In this way, the streams and rivulets of different ethnic or religious groups and cultures gradually flow into the rivers of patriotism, watering and leading the nation to greatness and glory.

Flip this and think of our dear country. To be sure, we have had great men and women who rose up to the challenges the history of their times. I do not to bore you with their names. However, time has passed and it would seem that whatever awe their names inspired has now descended into whispers now. Imagine trying to convince a young undergraduate in Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto to write an essay on the inspiring life and times of the great Obafemi Awolowo. Or, try asking a young undergraduate in your own university here in Oye- Ekiti, to write on the life and times of the great Sir Ahmadu Bello, you will meet with the same sense of shock. Similarly, if you go to Awka and asked a young Igbo to write on the life and times of Tafawa Balewa. He or she might think you are crazy.

Nigerian students might be more excited to write about Nelson Mandela, Julius Malema, Thomas Sankara, JJ Rawlings or Ibrahim Traore than any Nigerian hero they can imagine. Time, prejudice and ignorance have taken their toll on the memories of our youth today. And, it is not their fault. It is we, teachers and parents who have sown the seeds over the years.

For example, today, is it conceivable that a Professor Tunji Ajibola can become the VC of University of Nigeria, Nsukka? Or, can a Professor Sani Bello become the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan? Can a Professor Obiora Kanu become the Vice Chancellor of Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto? How did we come to this state, you might ask. We cannot lie to ourselves because we know the garden where this original sin was created. We know where, when and how our nation come to be just a story of dreams deferred, a story of shifting goal posts of opportunity.

We know how the foundations of our country started shifting. We know how the conductors of this orchestra of immense talents lost his baton. We know how and why this orchestra with immense talent could no longer find symphony. Over the years, the race to greatness has become tiresome drudgery. The finishing lines have become dimmer as the years rolled by. Many ask, is there hope? I answer, absolutely, unequivocally, yes.

It is true that for the first time, we have conducted seven unbroken elections. The optimists say we should clap because there is evidence that we have deepened Democracy. Each of these elections have been flawed. They have called the integrity of both the electoral body and the actors to question. Yet, we have soldiered on. Even the news of an attempted coup is treated with disdain. Surely, this must be a sign of progress. I would say, yes, the evidence suggests that flawed as our elections have been, there is evidence that our people still have high hopes that things can only change with improved practice and discipline in Democracy.

The military's loss of appetite for direct intervention is not necessarily based on their belief in Democracy but more to do with the fact that the military today, under the clouds of insecurity are now in power even if not in office! No matter the outcome, despite stumbling and falling, we must learn to rise and continue the race.

Democracy in Africa is very much like Joseph's coat of many colours. For example, the rituals of elections have continued, often combining gerontocracy with autocracy. Elections have been successfully conducted and concluded in Rwanda [2024], Cameroon [2025], Egypt [2025], Tanzania [2025] and recently, Uganda [2026].

In all, the liturgies are basically the same and all the boxes are ticked; voters trooped out, cast their votes, votes were counted and winners were declared to great acclaim. Post-election funerals here and there, broken skulls litter, the prisons take in more admissions, a few widows sob, civil society grumbles and life goes on. In all of these elections, the winners won by between 80 and in some cases, over 90% of the votes cast, not cast but counted and allocated. Normalcy returns with bandages soaked in blood. Time provides an analgesic that dulls the pain while we await the next election circle.

It is interesting that despite the violence and the humongous and immoral deployment of state resources to win elections, newly elected leaders go out of their way to turn their speeches into hymns of lamentations, accusing their predecessors of incompetence and corruption. They say they inherited empty treasuries and bad loans. They claim that they underestimated the depth of the rut. Cleansing the stable starts with ceremonial parade of the fraudsters of yesterday, often their former colleagues from other parties or their opponents within their parties. They are arraigned on stage managed trials surrounded by an orchestra of the most senior members of the Bar in the country.

In full court, with the judges presiding, the accused is arraigned, the lawyers, in synchronised logic, enter their pleas of not guilty and the case is adjourned and adjourned until adjournment becomes another word for sustaining Nigeria's culture of financial perfidy. This is why Nigerian politicians answer questions that we are not asking and promise to substitute the Book of Lamentation with the Book of Revelation. On inauguration day, the songs may change, but the hymn book is the same. This is the country to which you have come of age to. This is the country that has no national heroes who speak one language. This is the country where we have spent so much money building walls instead of bridges.

On the Mo Ibrahim Governance Index, there are four Categories under which Governance is measured or weighted. These are: Security & Rule of law, Participation, Rights and Inclusion, Human Development and Economic Opportunity. Under Security & Rule of Law, we have, Security and Safety, Justice, Accountability/Transparency, Anti-Corruption. Under Human Rights, we have, Participation, Rights, Equality and Women. Under Economic Opportunity, we have Infrastructure, Rural Economy, Public Administration and Environment. Under Human Development, we have; Health, Education, Social Protection and Sustainable Development. I will leave all of you to provide what could constitute a scorecard on all of these indicators based on your experience as Nigerians.

What does all this say to the Class of 2026? I have listed the troubles of our country so that you may know why we are gathered here. We are here because this University has invited us to come and celebrate with you and your parents. However, this celebration is mainly about you, the graduands, you, young men and women into whose hands tomorrow is being entrusted. Do not lament about the conditions of our country. Be inspired to light up this darkness. This is not where Nigeria ought to be.

All the Asian Tigers who became independent before or after us have achieved greatness. The lives of their leaders speak of sacrifice, hard work, single minded dedication, patriotism. They saw the sacrifices of their leaders in their selfless focus on education, health and unity. Citizens unite when the state provides institutions and infrastructure to unite them. Unity is not a response to moral suasion. Unity happens when citizens can light their candles from the big candle of state. We have not failed in Nigeria due to lack of trying. We have not hit the target because we are not good marks men. We have not failed from lack of trying. No, we have only tried wrongly.

Military rule represents the crime scene from where they gather the evidence of our state of decline. The first generation of Nigerian politicians and bureaucrats could have matched their counterparts in Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, India or any other country that was developing at that time. The military led us to a war. They destroyed the foundation of the rule of law by substituting our Constitution and Legislature with the iron clad rule of military dictatorship. The army was not a band of bad men. On the contrary, most of them were decent men who really and truly wanted to and tried to do good. The birth of a brilliant child does not mitigate the crime of a rape. Military rule was a rape on our Democracy.

Years of military rule fragmented our country and institutionalised both violence and corruption. When it was time to go, they still wanted a Democracy in their own image. The failed teleguided programme of a transition to Democracy turned into a cruel joke. The annulment of the 1993 elections and the subsequent death of Chief Abiola, the winner of those elections were the symptoms of the disease the military had foisted on our country. Nigeria has still not recovered from the impact of these phases of our moral bankruptcy. We see this today in the distrust of politics, the political class itself and the processes.

The intergenerational dialogue in Nigeria has not happened because the bridges are broken. We have adopted a culture of selective amnesia, a fractured sense of who we are, our history, culture and how these could have been brought together to achieve the lofty goals of our national anthem which speak of a country where no one is oppressed or the goals of our coat of arms which loudly proclaimed the ideals of Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress. Sadly, we have failed on all counts. Still, we must find the reasons to ensure an ordered dialogue between the generations, no matter how sad or difficult or painful this may be.

Today, parents often scold their children for being indulgent and they say, when I was your age, I had already done this or that. Today, we excoriate the Youth by reminding them that Akintola, Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Tony Enahoro, Yakubu Gowon, Joe Garba, Muhammad Murtala, Ibrahim Babangida, Odumegwu Ojukwu, Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammad Buhari, Matthew Mbu, fought for independence, became Ministers, Military Administrators, rose to prominence and achieved greatness in their 20s and 30s! Are you the youth of today supposed to feel guilty or believe that you have not achieved what your parents achieved? The answer is No. Do not feel despondent at all. There is hope for you and here is why I say so.

At the time they rose to greatness, these great men did not have the education that you have now. Most of them were the only kids on the block and they had no one competing for space with them. Some of them, with their Secondary School certificates or the Teachers' Training Certificates were the only educated people around. They did well but the times have changed. As Bob Dylan said in his song, The Times They are A Changing!

Class of 2026, you are young, but not lazy. You feel excluded, but do not let anyone shut your dreams. Do not think you do not have a voice or that you are invisible. If the noise outside drowns your voice, sing with your heart. If they refuse to give you a seat at their table, do not be envious. Simply design and build your own tables. Never think that you have come late.

Do not feel frustrated by those ahead of you. They have seen what you have not seen, they know what you do not know. They were you yesterday. They gave birth to you. They too were rebellious and believed they could change the world. They thought the best way was to destroy the temple. Sadly, they realized that they did not even have a plan for a new temple! Read history. Read their stories. Read about their failures. Read about their achievements. Read biographies and novels about our country. Listen to the proverbs and the songs. Learn the dances. There is no substitute for hard work and knowledge. Be patient with your parents because they too were impatient with your grandparents yesterday.

An intergenerational dialogue will grow out of respect. We elders must understand that the adrenalin which drives their children today is the same one that drove them yesterday. This rebellion is in our genes. Their music is not your music. Their food is not your food. And so on. Let us create the spaces that create harmony across the generations. Every leader did their best with the resources that were available to them at their own time. So, be patient with one another. The road to greatness is not linear.

Class of 2026, this is the Nigeria of your inheritance. What are you going to make of it? Do not envy the children of the rich and powerful. Do not look for the shoulders of a very rich father or mother to lean on, nor should you build your future on your projected inheritance. Learn from history. Look at the world of possibilities that lies ahead of you. Have you ever heard of a man called Archimedes? He is the author of the theory of floatation and lived between 287-211 in ancient Greece.

As the story goes, the King Hieron 11 of Syracuse had given gold to a smith to make a crown for him. When the crown came back, the King suspected that the goldsmith had hidden some of his gold but he had no way of knowing. Archimedes was called upon to find a solution to this problem. Archimedes went to the bath to relax, not to solve a problem. Then, he had a flash of inspiration. It was while he was relaxing that he discovered that water spilled to the ground when he entered the bath. He concluded from this that the displaced water must be of the same volume or less as he himself. To solve the problem, all he had to do was to have lumps of gold and silver and to see the weight difference. This discovery created so much excitement in him that he jumped out of the bath, naked, and ran out shouting, Eureka, Eureka on the streets [I have found it!] According to the law of floatation; An object submerged, fully or partially in a fluid, experiences an upward force equal to the weight it displaces. Look around at the road less travelled. Seek solution to the nation's problems rather than lament, abuse or curse those who have gone before you. You can help to clear their mess but also build on the good things they did. Like Archimedes, you could be responsible for the next invention that will change lives.

Class of 2026, rise up. Today, like the crooked goldsmith, those entrusted with making a crown of gold for Nigeria have given us a counterfeit crown. This is what is delaying our coronation. Is one of you ready to be the honest goldsmith because so many thieves who have corrupted our gold. Go out and invent an application to help us wipe the fraudsters out. Class of 2026, give yourself an assignment to create change not to complain about the present. Class of 2026, to help push you forward, I will give you eleven rules from my head. Please feel free to call them the Bishop Kukah Rules for Success. Go out. Put my claims to the test.

1: Don't be tempted to rush to swim in other people's pools simply because they look attractive. You do not know the depths nor are you sure of your swimming skills. Do not rush to take the job that will change your life. Take the job that can help you save other lives not only yours.

2: Be calm. Learn to stay in your lane. Do not rush to another lane simply because the traffic seems faster. You cannot see the potholes that might lie ahead. Learn not to jump the queue. God's choice is in your lane, perhaps just in front of you. Be careful not to rush take a bullet that is not your own.

3: Choose your battles well. Do not be in a hurry to box beyond your weight. Ensure that you take on a battle you have a fair chance of winning. If you lose, don't give up. Get up and try again.

4: Open a Savings Account in the Bank of Humility, Kindness and Respect. They are both savings accounts. Every act of kindness or service is a deposit paid in.

5: Create your own boundaries and design your own road blocks. Cherish privacy. Travel your own road even when it seems lonely and quiet at times. Silence can be loud.

6: Listen and learn from others, even if it seems that you are brighter than them. Listen to men and women of experience especially your parents. Had Icarus listened to his father, Daedalus the master craftsman, he would not have crashed to his death after he went too close to the sun.

7: Do not fight against a door because it is closed. Do not insist on opening it. It may be your protection at that moment.

8: Learn not to live a borrowed life. Avoid loans no matter the urgency. Loans often create a deep hole that you may not be able to fill in future except you dig another hole.

9: When the rope of a relationship ruptured through no fault of your own, hold your own end of the rope. Stay faithful. What belongs to you will ultimately return. Don't cling too much to what you think you love. It may choke you. Don't drown in someone else's storm.

10: Trust in God. You may have other names for him, it does not matter. Never forget that you are not here by accident. God has no photocopy of you anywhere. No matter your condition or situation, you are a perfect image of what He planned for you. Success depends on co-operating with Him. Class of 2026, a great world lies ahead of you.

11: Class of 2026, remember whose sons and daughters you are. Learn the history of this great country. Know its peoples and cultures. This great university is an investment by the people of Nigeria in you. The money invested in your education is money from the people of Nigeria. So, cherish this great country because it has allowed you to dream. Class of 2026, remember I am one of your classmates. Let us dream together.

Finally, let me return to the title of this lecture. The emergence of Barack Obama as the first black man to become the 44th President of the United States of America (2009-2017) gave confidence to the black world. However, it was the climax of hundreds of years of the struggles of black people who rose from slavery to greatness. A saying electrified the young generation. It said: They crawled so we could walk. They walked so we could run. They ran so we could fly. Now, we have the wings. It is left for us to decide. So, build on the dreams and struggles of those who came before your generation. In this way, this dialogue will ensure that we make the pillars of our unity stronger.

Chairman of the Governing Council, Senator Ndoma Egba, SAN, distinguished members of Council, I thank you for the great honour that you have done to me. The outgoing and the incoming Vice Chancellors, visiting Vice Chancellors from other Universities, Members of the academic and non-academic community of the University, Traditional rulers, Graduands and their parents, I thank you all for your very kind attention.

