POSSSESSORS AT THE GATES

Protocols
I am truly glad and grateful to have been chosen for the role of speaker at this lecture, which is one of the events marking the fiftieth anniversary of Obafemi Awolowo University. It is an honour for which I feel undeserving, but which I cherish dearly, since the combined wisdom of the Vice Chancellor and his team brought me here. In a way, I feel somewhat entitled to the consideration, since I have had many friends on the faculty of this university over the years, and good numbers of OAU Alumni have been my colleagues in one workplace or the other. For good measure, I have a nephew who trained here as a medical doctor, and a niece who received a pharmacy degree here. So, even if I am not an Alumnus because I had left university before 1962, I have OAU connections that are dear to me.

Let me add my voice to the many that have offered warm congratulations to Obafemi Awolowo University for fifty years of respectable service to the nation of Nigeria. 50 consecutive years of respectability is not a mean achievement in this environment. The fact that the university is now standing with confidence at the portal of the next fifty, is sufficient proof that the first fifty years have not gone to waste. It also persuades us that the OAU has managed the challenges and opportunities of the past and present with skill and success. May this continue to be the case for an even longer future. Congratulations on your Golden Jubilee.

The Lecture
Permit me to begin by offering the explanation for the title of this lecture. It is my view that the whole of the life of a human being can be seen as a string of opportunities: opportunities for doing those things that help to fulfil one’s life purpose. Many times, we find that, in order to do this, we must address one challenge or the other. Because we live in communities, our handling of opportunities is influenced many times by other people. Depending on the role that such people have in the relationship, they may be responsible for facilitating our access to the particular opportunity – or they may have the ability to deny us access. Thus, all of us seem to stand at different “gates” of opportunity. We are there, either because we need to pass through the gate in order to reach an opportunity, or because we are responsible for manning the gate so as to provide access for other people.
To give just two illustrations: Organizations that establish or manage educational institutions may be seen as gatekeepers of the opportunity for other people to gain the benefits of education; and those who come seeking access to education are seen as stakeholders of the situation, doing their best to pass through the gates and take advantage of what lies beyond. We may also see those who serve in government, or indeed, in any other area of human endeavour, as gatekeepers, possessing, as they do, the responsibility to provide the opportunity for citizens to express their individual and collective productivity.

Therefore, to summarize the thesis of this paper, it is possible that we all stand at different ‘gates’ every day of our lives, either because we have – or possess – the responsibility for creating access for other people, or because we ourselves need to use the gate to get to where we want to go. Even those who are only seeking access must also have – or possess – the capacity for using the opportunity to the best advantage, so that the real objectives for coming to the gate at all may be realized. However the mere possession of the power to manage access to opportunity is empty and of no consequence, unless and until we conduct our affairs in a manner that can lead to the realization of our objective. As we celebrate 50 years of our university, this is a good time to look at some issues in depth, and make an analytical assessment of the degree to which we have been mere possessors, rather than true managers and active stakeholders, of the gates of opportunity in Nigeria of the last fifty years.

**OAU Through 50 Years**

25 years ago, when Obafemi Awolowo University came to its silver jubilee, two scholars of the university edited a volume that narrated the history of the institution. For what may be regarded as a good reason, Olufemi Omosini and 'Biodun Adediran titled the volume; *Great Ife: A History of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; 1962-1987*. They used this title in spite of the many challenges and problems of the university that they freely acknowledged. For them, the real achievements of the university in its first 25 years definitely surpassed the issues that might have been seen as constraints or difficulties. The Vice-Chancellor at the time, Professor Wande Abimbola, added his own testimony in the foreword to the work, in which he described the OAU as “one of Africa’s greatest universities.” Clearly, the determination to establish and run a “great” university has been embedded in the philosophy of the founders of this university from the very start.
This week, we are marking 50 years of OAU, and, no doubt, there will be copious references to the many great Alumni of this university and the many dimensions of real value that they have added to the Nigerian society. We may even spare some time and space to refer also to the thousands of Alumni who add eminent value to other societies beyond the shores of Nigeria. An Internet visit to the OAU portals also reveals the many ways in which this university continues to impact the development of learning and research in collaboration with many foreign institutions. No one can miss or ignore the real respect that OAU and its Alumni enjoy among highly reputable communities of scholars around the world. On this occasion, therefore, we must congratulate Obafemi Awolowo University, not only for still being here at 50, but, more importantly, for sustaining a credible effort to live up to its preferred appellation — “Great Ife!”

As we all know very well, it is one thing to start out as a great institution; it is quite another thing to remain great, considering the changes and chances that the environment may throw up at different points in time. Indeed, I hold the view that many of the institutions that were the pride of Nigeria fifty years ago are no longer holding their own. Many have succumbed to the pressures of irresistible forces over the years! An earlier Vice-Chancellor of Obafemi Awolowo University, Professor H.A.Oluwasanmi, speaking in 1972, ten years into the life of the university, felt compelled to sound a note of warning about the creeping tendency of the military government of the time to encroach upon the freedom that universities needed to pursue their objectives. He reminded the audience at that year’s Convocation that universities needed freedom if they were to succeed in their responsibility of holding open the gates of educational opportunity to their students. Hear what he said on the subject:

“A university requires a considerable measure of freedom to discharge its responsibilities. ... Any laws or organizational structure which curtails the freedom to teach and pursue research undermines, by the same token, the collective ability of the university to make any significant contribution to the solution of the social and economic problems facing society. ...It is not by the mechanical process of relating curricula to the transient needs of a society that a university makes the greatest impact. It is by the careful and diligent nurturing of the fundamental freedoms of the universities to teach and to do research that the huge investment in higher education can be fully rewarded.” (H.A.Oluwasanmi: An Address by the Vice Chancellor, 14th October, 1972)
Universities and Academic Freedom

Professor Oluwasanmi’s words remind us of two fundamental concepts that have been with the university institution from the very beginning. The concept of ‘university’ itself, we are told, was derived from the emergence of a community of teachers and scholars (“universitas magistrorum et scholarium”), which took upon itself the concerted effort of promoting the development of knowledge and learning in a community that was dedicated to that purpose. The second concept – that of academic freedom - also dates back to the 12th century, with the articulation of the constitutio habita of the University of Bologna (1158), which was meant to guarantee the right of a travelling scholar to unhindered passage in the interest of education. Oluwasanmi’s intervention was, in reality, a reiteration of concepts that go to the heart of the recognition of a community of teachers and scholars who must manage the gates to higher educational opportunity with unfettered freedom.

The history of tertiary education in Nigeria suggests that the freedom of the university community was a reality at the start. Even though universities were created initially by government decision, it was recognized that such institutions must have considerable autonomy, for example in deciding what courses to teach, what research to pursue, and how quality and achievement should be recognized and acknowledged in the university system. In other words, the university community must be a ‘possessor’ of academic freedom. If Oluwasanmi was concerned enough to speak in 1972, it suggests that, as with any freedom, the possessor must also occasionally stand up and become a ‘defender’ of his freedom. We may yet have time to consider how well the possessors of academic freedom in this land have stood up to defend their possession.

We must remind ourselves that university autonomy is not an end in itself. Rather, it provides the platform from which decisions that lead to success should be taken. As we observed a moment ago, the university should be able to decide what courses to teach, what research to pursue, and how the advancement of members of faculty should be determined. In other words, this University – any university – has the responsibility, not only to seek to satisfy humanity’s thirst for knowledge, but also to justify the belief that scholarly expertise has the capacity to enable society to address difficult social and economic problems, and to achieve the desired outcomes of people’s collective effort. When we review all the other provisions that society can call upon to work for achieving these objectives, the preeminent place must be
awarded to institutions of higher education. The reason for promoting freedom for the holders of positions in the university is that their responsibility is actually an obligation. They must use the resources that they receive to grow the top level human capacity that the nation needs. Such a huge responsibility must be accompanied with commensurate authority to make competent decisions; otherwise, the arrangement is doomed to failure.

One of the university’s tasks, according to Henry Newman, is to “set forth the right standard; and to train according to it; and to help forward all students towards it according to their various capacities … and that training of the intellect which is best for the individual himself (also) best enables him to discharge his duties to society” (Newman, 1852). The need to join other members of society in a positively collaborative endeavour highlights the fact that the product of the learning process should be able to apply what he has learnt both for his own benefit and for the progress of the society in which he lives (Alos, 1999). Thus, the educational process enables the beneficiary to acquire character as well as knowledge, and knowledge without character is seen as an incomplete outcome of the learning experience.

**The University Graduate and Society**

Let us take some time to consider the assertion by John Henry Newman that the training of the intellect, which happens at university, is also the best preparation for the graduate to discharge his duties to society. In particular, if we examine that statement in relation to the Nigerian society of the 21st century, are we able to say with confidence that our universities provide their graduates with the wherewithal to discharge their duties such that they can improve the condition of the society into which they emerge after university? Indeed, what is the condition of the society for the improvement of which these graduates are taking responsibility?

In Nigeria, we have – we possess – a land that has been created by Almighty God, and into which He has poured endowments of such superior quality that its human occupants should have no difficulty accessing the basic requirements for living a reasonably good life. The resources of this nation, to which human beings have added very insignificant value, are more than enough to take good care of our true needs. The human resource itself is of such good quality that our people are
capable of earning true respect, whether at home or abroad. We have indigenous
cultures and traditions that give pride of place to good behaviour and positive
neighbourliness. All available evidence suggests that Nigerians can be highly
intelligent, enterprising, creative and productive.

There is more! Nigerians respect noble family values, and take family responsibility
seriously. The extended family practice teaches us to have a keen sense of
communal responsibility. Our brothers and sisters in West Africa will testify to the
fact that we have an adventurous spirit, especially if the adventure leads us to
commercial profit. We have a preference for self reliance as a way of living a
respectable life, and have been taught that people should earn the respect of others
by how well they perform rather than by what wealth they display. In our indigenous
communities, we do not normally give leadership responsibility to someone who
cannot show that he has handled some smaller assignment with success. Above all,
we respect one another’s space and property: we look with contempt at anyone who
has been proved guilty of appropriating someone else’s goods without that person’s
consent. Through the esusu (Yoruba) or isusu (Igbo) culture, our people learn never
to betray communal trust; and we have such respect and awe for Almighty God that
we would not trivialize our relationship with Him by dishonouring an oath which we
have sworn in His name. Through all these attributes and traits, we can justifiably
claim to be possessors of respectable values and beneficiaries of a noble heritage.

Many of us can still remember the way we used to be. Our pre-independence
leaders were people who made enormous sacrifices as they struggled to win our
right to collective self-expression. The public office holders of our First Republic
were shining practitioners of conscientious service delivery. Our sportsmen and
women wore our national colours with pride as they competed successfully in
international arenas. Our compatriots were unapologetic in claiming their identity as
Nigerians; they were thrilled to be possessors of a name that commanded respect
and attention. Nigerians were not only proud possessors of the name, they were
also conscientious practitioners of the values that their possession demanded of
them.
How do I know all this? I know it because I experienced it, and I remember it! I have just been describing to you the society into which I came, gladly and gratefully, when I left university. It was also the society into which the University of Ife was born.

Now, our emerging young graduates are coming into the new Nigeria. The name, you notice, has not changed. We are still possessors of the name that has been bequeathed to us, but alas, the values, the attributes, have crumbled in our hands! Things have gone so bad that the athletes who used to win medals wearing our national colours, now run and jump for countries in Europe. We stand on the sidelines wincing with envy as sportsmen and women from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, run laps of honour celebrating their victory, draped in their own national flags! Two questions must now engage our serious attention – How did we get here? Where do we go from here?

Perhaps I can suggest an answer to the first question. I believe we came to our condition today because we forgot the supreme power, and the supreme wisdom, of Almighty God. No, I am not about to take you on a journey into religion, but we ought to help ourselves by studying God’s pattern of provision, and His wisdom in giving man pointers as to how to live this life. Have you noticed that, in God’s arrangement, the human being has been made in such a way that he can be truly comfortable and successful only when he is catering to his real needs? As soon as man begins to look for ways of feeding his greed, he enters into a territory of discomfort. Whenever man tries to eat more than his system requires; whenever man puts on more clothes than are appropriate for the prevailing weather conditions; if he tries to ride two horses – or drive two vehicles – at the same time, his situation becomes unsustainable. By the same token, trying to acquire more material wealth than one needs merely adds to one’s troubles. With current trends and lifestyles, those who buy personal aeroplanes when all they need is a car, find that the maintenance of the superfluous machine brings its own headaches, the type of headache that does not submit readily to two capsules of pain killer medication.

President Obasanjo once declared that corruption was Nigeria’s Number One Enemy. Contrary to the thinking in some places, it is greed, not poverty, which leads to corruption; corruption, in turn, then produces poverty that proves intractable if we try to address it through the distortions caused by corruption itself. Corruption
causes its apostles to place self interest above the interest of the whole community, and to become totally confused about the priorities that they should be pursuing in their positions of responsibility or influence. This is why the society that we described earlier has turned into a place where many people show a disdain for truth and justice; a place where office holders regularly abuse the authority and privilege of their office. A society in which partisan politics is so totally consuming that we have forgotten that politics is, in essence, only a means of achieving good governance. A society in which the young graduate quickly discovers that selection and advancement are driven, not by performance, but by patronage. A land of multiple opportunities for doing well, but where access to opportunity is denied by some who man the gates. They are so completely ignorant of their true role as gatekeepers that they take possession of the gate, creating tolls that must be paid by stakeholders, and asking terms that force intending beneficiaries to believe that they must trade away everything – especially their integrity – before they can obtain rightful access.

Leaders as Gatekeepers

One of the ways in which we often give ourselves false comfort is to declare, from time to time, that Nigeria’s problems should be blamed on a failure of political leadership. Of course, a leader who is greedy will be corrupt, and he is bound to fail in his leadership responsibility. But we ought to understand that leadership does not exist only at the top of the governance system; leadership is essential everywhere, beginning with the family, and going all the way through institutions, systems, associations and all other places where we work together to achieve certain ends. If we look closely, we will realize that leadership is necessary in every place where some responsibility or the other must be carried out. If we had good leadership performance in every family, would we not enjoy responsible and effective governance performance in the nation?

Leaders are also gatekeepers – custodians, not only of our material fortunes, but, more importantly, guardians of our values and standards. Governor Babangida Aliyu of Niger State describes himself as Chief Servant, reminding himself constantly that his true role is to facilitate his people’s access to the opportunities that the State offers them. When a greedy governor becomes only a possessor at the gate of
opportunity, he may siphon funds from his state treasury and transfer the money to
accounts in a foreign land. His gate keeping misdemeanour not only deprives his
people of their fortune, it enriches the economy of another nation while compounding
the poverty in his own territory of responsibility. When a parent or guardian starves
his child or ward of the training in values that can best happen in the family setting,
he is condemning the young person to a future of instability, where exposure to low
quality influence may turn him into a cultist, drug user, or some other kind of criminal.
Again, when a teacher at the highest level of our educational system employs a
method of knowledge sharing that ignores the need to stimulate the student’s
curiosity and powers of idea generation, he is failing in his duty to hold open the gate
of opportunity for the student’s future development. By the same token, we fail
woefully if we continue to run a system of governance that distorts the structure of
preparing and rewarding the gate keepers in our nation.

Let us examine some outcomes of present policies and practices in Nigeria:

- Doctors, teachers, and other professionals achieve lower take-home pay
  than members of the National Assembly who are on part-time employment
during the year. Do we truly believe that someone who, under our current
system, comes into possession of a seat in a legislative house, is worth more
to the good health and stable future of this nation than a teacher, a judge, a
medical doctor or a head of national security?

- Speaking a few days ago, the president of the Nigeria Medical Association
said that he had access to records that show that Nigerian citizens going to
India for medical treatment. spend about USD 500 million annually on this
medical tourism. One wonders how much it would cost our gatekeepers to
open the gates of home-based opportunity by creating medical facilities of
the correct standard right here in Nigeria.

- In a lecture delivered only a week ago in Abeokuta, a Senator quoted the
Chairman of the Committee of Pro-Chancellors of Nigerian universities as
saying that 75,000 Nigerians studying in Ghana, spend about N160billion
yearly – approximately 80% of the total budget for 33 Federal Universities in
Nigeria in 2012. Perhaps we feel comfortable with the even larger volumes
of funds that our students utilize in Europe and the United State, but to think that the gatekeepers of opportunity in Ghana are beating us at the game?

- We are already familiar with the fact that thousands of Nigerian professionals now live and work in the Diaspora. I was astonished to find, in the UK, a very vibrant Association of Nigerian Accountants, all of whom had qualified here in Nigeria. They were, in fact, ICAN professionals who had sought and found opportunities for meaningful work in the UK. I wondered why the gates of opportunity that Britain opened to them were firmly shut in their own homeland.

- Two more illustrations of these negative outcomes will suffice. Our legal system was unable to bring a high-profile offender to book here in Nigeria. Indeed, one of our law courts discharged and acquitted him, saying that the charges against him were not proven. He is now serving a jail sentence offshore for exactly the same offences. Another one of these gatekeepers, having enjoyed immunity from prosecution for eight years while he possessed the authority over his state’s treasury, found another law court that awarded him an everlasting continuation of his immunity, even though he is now out of office. Has anyone reckoned the extent of damage that these failures of the system have wreaked on the morale of the citizens of this nation?

- Our sixth illustration shows that we are not about to emerge from the woods yet! We hear that, despite all available evidence, the National Assembly has received no fewer than fifty-seven (57) applications for new states to be created in Nigeria. What could be the real intentions of the applicants? We could point to many more anomalies of the Nigerian situation, but I think we have cited enough for our purpose. Have we also noticed that we often try to correct these anomalies by defeating the very objectives that we set out to achieve? When the doctor, or the teacher, becomes frustrated with the gatekeepers in government, he withdraws his services and goes on strike. Does it ever worry us that an additional anomaly is created thereby? The victims of the action are not the perpetrators of the structural distortion. The patients who die are exactly those who cannot afford to seek medical
assistance offshore. The students whose university career is prolonged are those whose parents did not have enough to send them to schools overseas.

**Universities to the Rescue?**

Those illustrations reveal the fact that we, as a nation, are in far deeper distress than we may realize or acknowledge. We now have convincing evidence that we make a habit of using our own resources and structures to cripple our capacity for doing well. In another context, I have often expressed the view that Nigeria seems to have an allergy to good fortune. We seem to become uncomfortable, and even to fall ill, when anything good threatens to happen to us. Our ways of organizing our affairs actually depress the morale of responsibility holders, making them see no option that is better than going on strike or, in some cases, sabotaging the institutions that they volunteered to nurture and protect. Is it possible that our universities, the citadels of top level development of our elite human capacity, have also fallen victim of this malady? If we – members of the university community nationwide – if we ever think that the situation is truly hopeless, it will be because we are managing to destroy our own capacity for making amends. This would be the real tragedy of our position.

Mind you, some of the numbers are very impressive. According to available records from the National Universities Commission and the National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria now has anything between 101 and 110 universities. In the five years between 2000 and 2004, the graduates coming from the universities then in existence numbered 349,709. In the 2010/2011 session, our universities had a student population of 966,022; the Academic faculty were 38,829 strong. Thus in that session, the *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* in Nigeria had a population numbering over 1 million!

Someone may say that a community of one million in a national population of over 160 million is not particularly significant. That would be to miss the point. The members of the community of teachers and scholars belong there, not because of their large numbers. They are there precisely because their voluntary mission is to apply their expertise and resources to the development of top quality human capacity for the nation. They are like the proverbial “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”: we do not need either salt or light in overwhelming ‘quantities’ before they can be
effective. Indeed, a pinch of salt will go a long way in flavouring the sauce, because salt has properties that are effective in small doses. The point is that the effectiveness of salt depends on two important factors: the salt must influence its situation by sharing its properties with its environment; and it must avoid any attempt by the environment to overwhelm its salt flavour with some inferior substitute.

The other useful application of salt, of course, is its use as a preservative, employing its properties to prevent decay in items of food that might otherwise go bad. Salt literally “stops the rot”, and ensures the sustained wholesomeness of the matter to which it is applied. In this analogy, it is certainly not too much for us to expect that the communities of teachers and scholars in our universities represent our foremost hope for restoring our larger national community to the place of quality and excellence that it once had the potential to be! Given all that we know, why would we be justified in entertaining this hope?

**The Purpose of Learning at University**

Students graduate from university because, among other things, it is supposed that they have satisfied the university that they are fit, both in character and learning, to be released into the world. Learning, in this context, needs to be seen, not as a process that has ended, but as one that the learner may now pursue outside the walls of the institution, and without necessarily having to seek direction from his erstwhile instructors. In fact, what the university does for the graduate is to empower him to drive himself in the desired direction, and to continue to probe the dimensions of knowledge that constitute the opportunity for helping to improve the situations that he may encounter.

This provides the reason why we place so much hope on the potential of universities to facilitate the positive development of society. It is one of the reasons, for instance, why the managers of business corporations go to universities, every year, to interact with degree-year students in a drive to recruit the best human resource potential for their organizations. These students, about to graduate, are usually looking for opportunities to use that which they have acquired at university to operate whatever responsibility will be offered to them in the business world. Presumably, they entered the gate of learning opportunity at university some 4 years or so before now, and they have taken full advantage of that opportunity. The important question at
this point is to ask if the outcome has measured up to the expectation that the
graduate must now try to satisfy.

It is not unusual, these days, to hear or read comments of employers and others who
bemoan the allegedly low quality of the human material that comes to them from the
confines of tertiary institutions. It would seem that a number of corporations soon
discover that they must offer their graduate recruits additional, or even remedial,
learning experience before they can be considered fit for even the most elementary
responsibility in the firm. The firm may be eager to open the gate to employment
opportunity, but the candidate is not quite fit to walk through to meaningful activity.
From all appearances, the gap between expectation and performance seems to be
in the candidate’s ability to study a new situation, and generate useful ideas for
dealing with the issues that arise from such study. It seems also, that the new recruit
often has considerable difficulty in expressing himself, both orally and in writing, in
the language of routine interaction. These are the very attributes that the employer
expects to find in a university graduate, and the frustration is heightened when the
reality disappoints the expectation.

It is probably impertinent for me to indicate the causes of this undesirable
trend, but I take refuge in a thought once expressed by Albert Einstein, who said: “it
is nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely
strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry.” In my view, learning at the university should
not become so structured that it constrains the freedom that curiosity must enjoy.
We obviously need methods of teaching that facilitate the exercise of curiosity via
experimentation and the questioning of the status quo. Such an approach would
help us to turn out graduates who will consider it their obligation continuously to find
ways of adding something of real value to that which they received at university, not
by mere speculation but by the application of intelligent curiosity. The mind of the
student should be set free at every opportunity, and encouraged to examine a wide
range of possibilities, however far-fetched they may at first appear.

If we accept this, we must question what is said to be a growing tendency to
impart knowledge to students by means of handouts from teachers who, allegedly,
make some extra income from such practice. A student whose learning is contained
and circumscribed by his teacher’s handout cannot, from that experience, easily
extend, expand or transform that which he has been given. The philosophy in the past was that the student should be encouraged to seek out and go after sources of information that would strengthen his own capacity for adding value to the adventure of learning. Lifelong education feeds on the constant updating of knowledge through learning, and the university should give priority consideration to preparing students for post-university learning by guiding them to adopt the practice of what Einstein calls “holy curiosity.” This is still, perhaps, the best way of holding the gate of opportunity open for the university graduate, through which he will grow his capacity for extending the frontiers of his own knowledge and helping to transform his society.

Transformation is a word that has come into frequent use in recent days. Like many current concepts, the rhetoric may be very impressive without signifying any real understanding of what it takes to transform a society. Our confidence should be stronger if we can get our research scholars and social scientists to direct greater attention to this area of study. We must often wonder at the fact that, for instance we have agreed that corruption is a huge problem, and a menace to the happy future of our nation; yet, there is little evidence that academia has produced any credible study of the issue, nor have we discovered ways of overcoming it. Similarly, a number of universities have programmes in Political Science, which have been duly accredited by the NUC. Can there be a way of producing studies that will help to bring some sanity into political practice in Nigeria?

**Possession v. Ownership**

I would like to return now to the issue of *Possessors at the Gates*, which is the theme of this paper. Why is it that many keepers of the gates to opportunity perform so poorly, and make things so difficult for those whose access to opportunity they should facilitate? I find that one important reason is that many holders of responsibility take possession without having ownership. For example, when a man secures a position of responsibility for which he knows he is not really qualified or ready, he may choose one of two ways of behaviour. As a mere possessor, he will look for opportunities to acquire as much of the benefits of the position for himself as he can take in as short a time as possible. The work expected of the role may not get done, but the expenditure will be incurred and the money will be spent. Although
his name will be recorded as having held the position for a period, there will be no tangible value to show for the time and resources expended.

If, however, this position holder wants to take ownership of his responsibility, he will first make every necessary effort to have a clear understanding of the role that he is to play, and the value that is expected from him. He will spend the time needed to achieve this clarity, working extra hours if necessary. Among other things, he will ensure that he understands the relationship between the resources that he uses and the results that he achieves. He will not merely follow the instructions that he is given, he will try to know why, and how he can bring some initiative into following those instructions with some creativity. He will be constantly seeking ways to develop or grow the assets that he applies, and will not miss any opportunity to improve his productivity and that of the people for whom he is responsible. He will be, and be recognized as, an apostle of best practice.

In other words, the man who takes ownership of his responsibility develops a real commitment to it, and always tries to work to the highest standards and with consistently good discipline. He believes that he must keep faith with the stakeholders of the endeavour. The possessor does not think of values, standards or discipline; he thinks only of the quick benefits realizable in the immediate or short term, and has no real commitment since he is not interested in building a worthy legacy. For him, there is one preeminent stakeholder of the endeavour – himself!

We referred earlier to some of the undesirable outcomes that flow from the activities of possessors at the gates. Clearly, if we are going to improve the situation, we need to bring as many possessors as possible into ownership of their responsibilities. We need to do this in a way that persuades today’s possessors that it is in their own best interest to make the change. One of the benefits that we have is the fact that we do not have to invent a new society; we only need to restore the values and practices that once made us a respectable and self respecting people.

**The Role of Leadership**

Can we succeed in the task? Our best hope lies in our ability to rediscover good leadership at all levels of responsibility in Nigeria. I use the word, ‘rediscover’ because we know that we have had good leaders in the past. Whether in politics,
education, medicine, religion, or other sectors of society, we know that we have survived thus far because of *the labour of our heroes past*. If, indeed, that labour is not to ‘be in vain’, we have a duty to work our way back to the values and practices that informed leadership at all levels before and during our First Republic.

First, we must agree that anyone who seeks a leadership role ought to be fit for it. The best way to determine fitness is to agree the criteria that we should apply. After all, we see that Almighty God does not appoint people to leadership in the family until they have attained a certain level of maturity. People do not normally become fathers or mothers until they have learnt how to succeed as older brothers and sisters. With this as our frame of reference, I would suggest that leaders at any level should establish their fitness through four main considerations:

- **Pre-qualification**: the candidate should have had some experience, and should be able to show a verifiable track record of good performance in roles of identifiable responsibility;
- **Leadership attributes**: leaders need competence, courage, the right values, respectable standards, discipline and stamina that will sustain them in the role;
- **Results**: aspiring leaders should have produced some results in the past, of a respectable quality that met the expectations of their stakeholders;
- **Sustainability**: a desire and readiness to bequeath a future that is capable of sustaining the benefits of today.

With particular reference to the issue of sustainability, the ‘possessor’ type of leader, even when he is doing fairly well, concentrates only on getting tasks done for immediately perceivable results. The ‘owner’ type, on the other hand, believes that his true role is to build people, to develop people through the achievement of the tasks of today, so that the people themselves grow with experience. The outcome will be that future tasks will be done with better attitudes and greater skill, and the leader himself can see that he has developed other leaders in the process.

One of our problems is that we behave as if we think that a person can enter into a leadership role without appropriate preparation. We ought to borrow a leaf from the practice in the business world, where training and development are key issues in the
management of people. In the professions too, one does not become a full fledged partner in a law practice or in an accountancy firm until one has served an apprenticeship after acquiring the basic professional qualification. Look also at some of our indigenous communities, for example, in Ibadan; a man does not come to the throne of Olubadan until he has successfully served as chief at several lower levels.

The major lesson that we should learn from all this, is that we ought to adopt a system that enables people to grow into leadership; people should not be pitchforked into roles for which they have neither the training nor the competence. For people aspiring to leadership, we should create opportunities for them to acquire cognate experience in lower positions, and they should pass through specific bouts of development and training for higher responsibility. Even then, promotion to the role of leader should be offered only to those who demonstrate the right attributes for the higher responsibility. The advantage will be that we develop leaders who can take ownership of their role with maturity and a sense of responsibility.

One of the best ways of encouraging good performance among leaders is to empower and involve all other stakeholders in the monitoring and assessment of the leader’s performance. This, I believe, is the philosophy that underlies the democratic provision for electing leaders every four years. Leaders are required to present their report card so that the voters can have the opportunity of taking informed decisions. This practice encourages us to carry out open audits of the leaders’ performance, and to make the findings of such audits available for general information. It is also the reason for the importance that we attach to freedom of information, for which we agitated for statutory backing for a long time. For stakeholder involvement to be intelligent and effective, we should also encourage educational institutions at primary and secondary levels to restore the teaching of civic and other forms of responsibility as integral aspects of their curricula. All this will give us a better informed stakeholder population that can take ownership of the responsibility of holding leaders to account. Without this drive for accountability, possessor-type leaders will continue to seek immunity from good sense, and use it with outrageous impunity.

For real success in this endeavour, we must look afresh at the content of the education that we offer in our schools, and also at the provision that we make for people to learn informally through daily experience. Today’s evidence suggests that
we need to provide specifically for the better education of both leaders and other stakeholders. Leaders need to be taught that leadership exists mainly because there are responsibilities to be carried out. Leadership, therefore, is not just title, position or status. Leaders should be taught to understand that they receive authority in office only because they need the power to make decisions and to dispose resources and assets. The ‘power’ that leaders are sometimes so eager to emphasize is actually given along with the responsibility so that certain results can be delivered. This is the main reason why there must be accountability as well, for a leader who has used the power of his role, but failed to deliver expected results, has shown the typical approach of a ‘possessor’ mentality. On the other hand, properly educated leaders and stakeholders will work together to add real value to their situations.

Let us keep, in the back of our minds, the fact that we are referring here, not just to high level political leaders, but to leaders at all levels, and in all areas of life in our society. If we experience considerable impunity in the conduct of may leaders today, it is mainly because the rule of law is very weak. We need to strengthen the rule of law by doing a number of simple, straightforward things.

First, we should ensure that leaders themselves adhere strictly to the laws of the land, and the codes of practice that have been instituted in governance and in the professions. We need to be firm in applying the rewards and sanctions that have been established for performance of good or poor quality. We should come away from the culture of secrecy in the treatment of offenders: those who misbehave should be named and shamed; just as those who do well should also be named and celebrated. We need to restore our society into a place where it is natural to behave well. For as long as we cover up evil doers, or even allow them to display the arrogance of untouchability, for so long shall our desire for a respectable country continue to elude us.

To summarize this part of our discourse, what we need, in my view, is a restoration of a culture of responsible leadership. We need to agree and articulate the values that are cherished by our society; and we only need to look closely at our truly indigenous communities to find valuable guidance for success. We should educate both leaders and stakeholders to take ownership by staying faithful to the principles
and standards that earn true respect, and we ought to become more transparent in the way that we manage responsibility, especially in matters that are important to our corporate coexistence.

**A Need for Integrity**

Becoming a keeper of the gate to opportunity is a high calling. The welfare and future of many people depend on how well we play the role, and, as we have already pointed out, we can add great value if we take true ownership, rather than mere possession, of our responsibility. One important reason why the performance may continue to fall short, is that there are certain things about responsibility that cannot be legislated. When an individual is performing badly, he is the first to know; he is also the one to decide if he will continue in his poor performance or make a change for the better. Therefore, the effective transition from possessor status to an ownership role, is a process that is largely self-driven. Self assessment and self improvement can only be effective if the individual is a person of true integrity, setting standards below which he will not permit himself to fall; taking the firm approach that he will not, in any situation, betray his own standards.

True integrity in this context means that the individual is determined to apply the moral courage to do only that which he knows or believes to be right; and to do this every time, whatever the situation. He must show a willingness to stand by what he believes, even when it means that he is standing alone! A willingness also to pay the price if it is the cost of showing integrity. And above all, the ability and determination to stay the course, to have the stamina to sustain a lifetime commitment to being a person of integrity.

If we are to return to a culture of responsible leadership in Nigeria, we need to articulate and share the values that we cherish as a people; we must agree the rules and codes that should govern our interactions, celebrating people who keep the rules and punishing those who disobey them. We ought to make commitments - commitments to high productivity, good ethics, and the high standards that lead us to consistent best practice. It is a description of the kind of best behaviour and good discipline that were the original hallmarks of a university education. So, with over one hundred universities, and hundreds of thousands of people who have passed through their gates, should Nigeria not, by now, be a place of the best leadership
culture and unmatchable opportunities for showing pre-eminence in good, disciplined performance on all fronts?

**Hope for the Future**

Fifty-two years after winning our sovereignty, we cannot claim that description by any stretch of the imagination. This cannot be because we do not have the resources or the ability to be what we need to be. Our resources are too visible for us to deny them. As for our ability, the best proof is to be found in the numbers of our professionals and other compatriots who bless other nations with performance of respectability and excellence. They have done so for many years, and they continue to win the respect and trust of the citizens of those nations that have offered them opportunities for positive self expression. There is no doubt that Nigeria has possession of the resources and the ability to be a leader among nations. Our problem is that we have too many possessors at the gates of opportunity in this country, and they have, so far, succeeded in creating the impression that we are unable to take ownership of our fortunes and make the best of that which we have.

In all my interactions with executives, with students and with large numbers of ordinary people, I am led to believe that we all agree that this situation should not continue for much longer. Indeed, I receive the impression that we believe, deep in our hearts, that our low quality performance cannot survive for much longer. What we seem unable to decide is how exactly we are going to change things for the better. And this is a good reason for turning to our people and places of highest learning – our universities, where we endeavour to extend knowledge through the discipline of learning; our universities where we seek to expand capacity through research, and where the young men and women of our nation are expected to become people of excellence, not only in learning, but also in character. Our hope for a more dynamic future rests largely on our ability to harvest the real benefits of the potential that our universities so obviously possess.

To take only one example: one is happy and grateful to discover how much attention OAU is devoting to research. From available information, more and more scholars from here are collaborating with research scholars elsewhere to operate Research and Education Networks (RENs) covering wide ranging fields of academic study. In this respect, this university is certainly living up to the expectations of its founders.
The founders also hoped that research would be the foremost activity that would help resolve the troublesome issues that this society might face. So, if corruption, for instance, is our enemy number one, is there some research effort that is ongoing now, and that has the potential to generate original ammunition for fighting this enemy? Let us be thankful that we still enjoy sufficient academic freedom to even conceive such an idea; an idea that may look outlandish at first consideration. But when we have recovered from the shock, let us give it some thought. It is just possible that the application of the university treatment could be an effective antidote for our obvious inability to tackle and defeat this cankerworm of our environment.

Or, to take another issue, can OAU create programmes in leadership studies, and persuade the possessors at our gates to take advantage of such programmes in preparing elected office holders for competent ownership of their responsibility? Is it conceivable that aspiring or incumbent office holders, who think that they have something to learn from Harvard, will accept well constructed programmes from Ife, even though there is no *estacode* payment involved? Can we think of anything that would work better for our holders of responsibility than a serious approach to their development by an institution of higher learning which, according to Professor Wande Abimbola, is one of Africa’s greatest?

**Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that “Great Ife” has come through fifty years of a performance that is worthy of celebration. What we believe is that the “greatness” of OAU can make even better impact on its challenging environment in the next fifty years. This may be the moment to renew the resolve of this university, as well as that of all the other universities in our country, that the real problems of their society must submit to the superior quality of education that they are so well positioned to offer. The reputable record of the first fifty years has come partly from “the labour of our heroes past.” Today’s heroes are called to other forms of labour, and such labour must also make its due impact on the issues of our time. Congratulations then, as the Obafemi Awolowo University steps out boldly to chase away the possessors at the gates, and to open unfettered access to the students and graduates of this institution who are eager to take ownership of the opportunities that lie ahead. Welcome to the next fifty years!
References
