

SPEECH AT FIRST ANNUAL NIGERIAN CULTURAL DAY

A very warm welcome to all of you (or as we say here in Germany, *Herzlich Willkommen*). Thank you all for accepting our invitation and joining us for the first edition of the Nigerian cultural day in Berlin.

We happen to be in perhaps the most culturally conscious cities in the world and as such, we thought it best to use this opportunity to draw attention to Nigeria's rich culture: Nigerian music, fashion, literature and art are all on display today. It was one of Nigeria's contemporary musical prodigies Fela Anikulapo Kuti who famously said in his song *Teacher Don't Teach me Nonsense*:

"You go for France, England, Italy, Germany Na dem Culture for there be Teacher for dem"

Fela was saying in pidgin, a polyglot West African language, that culture is the Teacher of a country. I for one would not argue with the King of Afrobeat: one can argue convincingly that Nigeria, with a rich multi-cultural heritage has a pedagogical advantage over others with close to 200 million people speaking as many as 300 different languages from the semi-arid fringes of the Sahara to the Savannah, rainforests and mangrove swamps of the Niger and Benue Rivers as they empty into the Atlantic Ocean. You will agree with me when I say the Geography of a country helps to shape its identity. Geography itself conspired to make Nigeria multicultural, as difference in climate and vegetation often lead to variations in mythology, self-expression, and raw materials for making musical instruments. In the case of Germany, the language had a geography. In the case of Nigeria, the geography has many languages but shares a common history of movement, trading and intermarriage.

Nigeria's diversity is among our greatest resources. In spite of the wide array of cultures and languages in Nigeria, there is a high degree of cross-fertilization that has been going on for centuries and which the anthropologists, linguists and other social scientists that aided its colonisation were cognizant of when they established its boundaries with the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers at its core. However, colonisation came with a heavy cultural price: that of Nigeria's own version of a Stunde Null, a zero hour when its pre-colonial history and culture were deemed to have ended because they were not good enough. Colonisation comes with a cultural hegemony. But even here, there are lessons for Nigeria to learn from Germany, a country that had to endure the soul searching of its own Stunde Null before coming to the self-understanding that history never ends and emerging stronger as a paragon of *Friedensmacht*.

As we celebrate Nigerian culture and cultural diversity here today, let us also remind ourselves of the importance of cultural property to a nation like Nigeria and to its national identity as a whole. Some of our greatest cultural properties that stand as testimonies to our rich cultural history and heritage remain out of sight and unknown to an overwhelming majority of Nigeria's 193 million souls (half of whom are under the age of 20). One of my predecessors listed a total of 1,744 works of art from the looting and plunder of Benin on display during an exhibition in a European city. And this single audit did not even include Ife bronzes and Nok terracotta dating back more than a thousand years, and last century spirited away to Europe.

The importance of the restitution of Nigeria's prized cultural property to its self-understanding and national identity cannot be over-emphasised. Let me remind us of the Italian *Aufklärung* philosopher Gianbatista Vico's maxim *Verrum esse ipsum factum*- truth itself is made, which rests on the principle that truth is verified through creation or invention. If we accept that human beings make their own history and what they can know is what they have made, then are Nigerians and Africans not being denied of knowing their history if they are denied ownership of and access to their most spectacular historical works of art and artefacts? Such mimetic representations of reality are all the more indispensable for Africa where there is a dearth of written accounts of ancient civilisations.

The pieces on display in the foremost museums of the world today are living proof that Africa possessed a pre-Newtonian empirical reality that enabled it to produce such masterpieces using scientific methods and that this was no fluke! When the Ife Bronze Head and similar works became known to the rest of the world, archaeologist Leo Frobenius theorised that they were produced by a colony of ancient Greeks that lived in southwestern Nigeria in 1300BC. Much to his credit, he did attempt to prevent the carting away of such priceless pieces.

It is important not to perceive Nigerian culture as an ASPECT of another culture, but rather, it should be allowed to stand on its own. I was therefore thrilled beyond measure to witness Berliners enjoying contemporary Nigerian music during the fete de la musique in June. Nigeria's film industry outstrips the growth of its population as the third largest in the world after Hollywood and India's Bollywood. I must however add here that we are equally set to become the third most populous nation on the planet by 2050, which is why I am using this platform to unequivocally appeal for the return of Nigerias looted works of art to help the next generation of Nigerians strengthen their collective identity and self-worth. That self-worth would go a long way in addressing tangential issues such as irregular migration and the lack of a *Kultur-arbeit*.

As you take in Nigerian art, music, literature and fashion at this event, I would also like to encourage those of you visiting from outside Germany to appreciate Germany's astonishing contributions to the cultural enrichment of mankind. I urge you to use this opportunity to visit Berlin's numerous museums, take in as much as you can of the classical music it has to offer, and for the younger ones, explore the night life.

My intention is not to bore you with a long speech but to let Art speak for Nigerian culture, so I will therefore stop here.

May I on behalf of all my colleagues at the embassy and organisers that put in so much of their time and energy to make this event possible thank you all once again for honouring our invitation.