

CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

DR. (MRS) MYMA BELO-OSAGIE

(Managing Partner, Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie)

Your Excellency, Chief Godswill Akpabio, Executive Governor, Akwa Ibom State; Your Eminence, Prelate Sunday Mbang; Royal Fathers, Principals, teachers and all other educationists, honoured ladies and gentlemen, students, in our timeless Nigerian phrase, may I take it that all protocols have been observed.

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here with you today chairing this ceremony which, as you know, is intended to honour one of the least acknowledged and most under-appreciated group of professionals in Nigeria today. As I stand here I am reminded of the well known quotation - probably now an adage - that says "If you can read this sentence, thank a teacher". The fact that I can stand before you here today is because I had the privilege of being taught by some amazing people - people dedicated to education; people who considered education a lifelong vocation and who were passionate not only about conveying their knowledge, but also about teaching their students to learn for themselves and encouraging their students to use the knowledge they had acquired in a productive way. I hope my presence here today serves in some small way to thank the generations of teachers who taught me but, more importantly, I hope it conveys, on behalf of myself and, I am sure, anyone who has ever been taught, our thanks to those who teach. Whether we say so or not, there are countless millions of us who truly appreciate the dedication and commitment of the teaching profession. Because we so rarely acknowledge what our teachers do for us and our children, I must commend the Inoyo Toro Foundation for instituting this incredible initiative and working so hard to ensure that this award ceremony has come to pass.

The Inoyo Toro Foundation has recognised, as all of us must, the vital importance of education in today's world. If Nigeria is truly to compete successfully in the world today, it needs educated citizens. Nigeria today is full of people discussing Visions (such as Vision 2010 or Vision 2020), Agenda (such as the 7 point Agenda that is our current focus) and Goals (such as the Millennium Development Goals that an economy such as ours must achieve). The Bible tells us (although I am taking some licence with the exact quotation) that we are permitted to have visions and dream dreams but I think we all recognise that if the Visions I have mentioned are to come to pass, if the Agenda is to become a working plan and if any of the Goals is to be achieved, there is a need for educated people. This reality was recognized hundreds of years ago. Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher, said "If your plan is for one year, plant rice, if your plan is for ten years, plant trees. If your plan is for one hundred years, educate children." Hundreds of years ago, it was clear that without educated people it is not possible either to plan for the achievement of any Visions, Goals or Agenda items or to implement them. If Nigeria is, by God's grace to develop into a country that makes progress over the next hundred years, the children who are the future of this country must be properly educated. Without our teachers, particularly teachers who are of the calibre we seek to honour here today, educating our children and in many ways all of us, we will not have the quality of people we need to achieve our Visions, to achieve our Goals, and to convert any Agenda from being merely an Agenda to a reality. Each and every one of our teachers should therefore never be in any doubt as to how important they are for the development, the well being, the prosperity and indeed the continued existence of this State and our nation.

Like any human being, I have particular prejudices and preferences. I always stress that I prefer people who

are educated - not those who have simply gone to school. To my mind an educated person suggests a person who develops and retains an enquiring mind throughout his or her life, one who is self motivated and inquisitive, one who will sometimes learn simply for the sake of learning and not just to pass an exam, one who will sometimes challenge orthodoxy or received teaching. I do not wish to suggest that it is easy to develop such people and I certainly acknowledge that it can sometimes be a problem to have them. As anyone who knows my children will agree much as I can secretly enjoy the fact that my children are able to argue - sometimes very logically and with very good points - for something I don't agree with or do not wish to give them or allow them to do, it can be absolutely infuriating to listen patiently to these arguments and I am often forced to resort to the age old solution of simply saying "Well I am your mother and this is my final decision". I do believe, however, that educated people of the kind I have described are the kind of people Nigeria truly needs. I would therefore like to appeal first to all teachers, especially our awardees, to continue encouraging their students to become educated people in the sense I have described; second to all students to strive to become educated in the sense I have described; and third to the Inoyo Toro Foundation and its screening committee to continue to make the ability to produce an educated child an important criterion when seeking to identify candidates for the Inoyo Toro Awards.

I must take a moment to acknowledge the work done by the screening committee headed by Professor E. Mbipom, an educationist who, I am certain, needs no introduction to this audience. The challenge of identifying suitable candidates for short-listing would have been considerable and in taking on this task Professor Mbipom and the committee he headed gave of their time and their resources in a manner that very few people are prepared to do today. We truly

appreciate their efforts in supporting the work of the Foundation. In particular I think Prof. provides a living proof of what we all know to be true - for a real teacher, teaching is a vocation that continues throughout his or her life and one that he or she will continue to spend time and energy supporting. Thanks to all of you.

In addition, I must congratulate Your Excellency, Godswill Akpabio, the Executive Governor of Akwa Ibom State, and indeed the whole of Akwa Ibom State, for having produced sons and daughters of the State who buy into the vision, dreams and goals for the educational sector established by your administration. It is because you have produced indigenes with this kind of vision that no official of Akwa Ibom will, by God's grace, ever have cause to lament - as the Commissioner for Education, Science and Technology of another State in Nigeria has recently done - about the poor quality of the teachers in his state. In his state 19,125 public school teachers were asked to take an English and Mathematics test set for children in Primary 4. Although 2,628 of these teachers are university graduates, only 1 of them passed this test while 10 of these university graduates were unable to score any mark at all - In other words to put it colloquially, they "scored Zero" . Apart from the one university graduate, only 6 other teachers were able to pass this test. In other words the Commissioner had to confess that only 7 out of 19,125 teachers in his state could pass a test meant for children in Primary 4. This is a truly shocking statistic. If the indigenes of this State cared enough to follow the example set by the Inoyo Toro Foundation, I am sure this appalling situation could not have occurred. I therefore hope you will continue to support and encourage the Foundation.

Anyone who understands the fundamental importance of education to any economy, be it developed or emerging, has to acknowledge and also support those who deliver

that education. But I believe the Inoyo Toro Foundation should also be supported for another reason. Like virtually every other private sector employer I have spoken to throughout Nigeria, I and the partners of my law firm have had occasion to mourn the quite frankly appalling quality of many of the students and graduates seeking employment today. The statistics I just mentioned support our concerns. These so called students and graduates are probably the products of some of the so called "Miracle Schools" or "Miracle Centers" that seem to have sprung up in several parts of Nigeria; institutions that do our children a major disservice because they teach our children rote learning and, to be blunt, teach them how to cheat, thereby laying the foundation for a future based on lies and fraud. The private sector has a desperate need for well educated employees if it is to thrive in an increasingly globalised environment and the Inoyo Toro Foundation has recognized that of the many areas in which our government needs assistance, the support and encouragement of the educational sector is one where a true public-private partnership can be achieved. Even if the responsibility to provide basic education rests only with our State or Federal Governments - and I do not wish to suggest that I agree with this view - it is certainly in the interests of the private sector of Nigeria to support and encourage education and all those who work to provide it. In recognising those teachers who excel, the foundation is taking up the private sector challenge and should be supported and encouraged to continue doing so. It is particularly commendable, and I am certainly one of those who are pleased, that the Foundation has focused on those who teach within our public schools.

The Inoyo Toro Foundation hopes to enhance the standard of education in Akwa Ibom State and to provide a model that can be followed throughout Nigeria - certainly it would be useful in the state that I have refused to name. Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie (UUBO), the law firm of

which I am the Managing Partner, is pleased to support this initiative. We at UUBO believe very strongly in excellence and seek to achieve it in the practice of our profession. Therefore for us, supporting an award that seeks to achieve "Excellence in Teaching" is a natural fit. Although we acknowledge the importance of each of the areas identified by the Foundation - Mathematics, the basic sciences and English Language - and support all the goals of the Foundation, our financial support is targeted towards acknowledging and rewarding the teaching of English Language. Our reasons for so doing will be obvious to many but it may be useful to mention some of them because they are reasons that speak not only to Udo Udoma and Belo-Osagie's particular concerns, but also to the needs of Akwa Ibom state and Nigeria in general.

As we all know, the ability to speak and communicate clearly in any language is an immensely useful tool. No matter what our discipline (be this mathematics, science, engineering or anything else), no matter what our trade or profession, language conveys our thoughts, our intentions, our feelings and indeed the understanding of that discipline, trade or profession as well as the transfer of the knowledge within each trade, discipline or profession. Used inappropriately language can generate quarrels or even wars. Used appropriately language can soothe the deepest of our fears and sorrows. I am sure many of us have been soothed by the words of a particular hymn or poem or touched by a few words of thanks. Certainly as any lawyer, or anyone who is affected by any law knows, the specific language of a statute can make all the difference between being right or wrong, rich or poor, indeed between life or death.

It may well be the case that someday the ability to communicate in a language such as Mandarin will be important but in the globalised world of today the ability to speak and communicate clearly in English is

a vital tool and one that should not be taken lightly. Certainly while English remains the language of government, business and commerce in Nigeria, it is important that we encourage excellence in English - excellence in the use of that language as well as excellence in the punctuation, grammar and other rules that accompany its use, all of which form part of the language.

I often give as an example of the importance of this issue, the title of a very well known book on grammar: Eats; shoots; and leaves. With different punctuation, that sentence can mean two very different things. With commas or semi-colons - and therefore read as follows: eats; shoots; and leaves - the sentence suggests a person who eats something; shoots someone or something probably with a gun; and then departs from the location or venue where the shooting took place. Without punctuation, the sentence - which would then read as follows - eats shoots and leaves - suggests an animal - or possibly even a person - that feeds on (eats) the shoots and leaves of a plant. The meaning of these two sentences is so different that if one, rather than the other, was incorporated in a legal document it could prove fatal to someone's legal rights. Even in a non-legal environment such differences are important. As I have suggested, they can make the difference to relationships, to understanding issues and to solving problems. This is the reason why the Partners and Associates of UUBO believe it is important to speak and write English well; and as lawyers are, as I have mentioned, happy to support not only the goals and vision of the Inoyo Toro Foundation but more specifically the award for excellence in teaching English.

I would like to thank the Foundation for inviting me to chair this ceremony, to thank you all for your attention and to join in welcoming all of you to this celebration of excellence.

Thank you.