

THE YORUBA UNITY DAY OF SEPTEMBER 23

Message from

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For and on behalf of the Yoruba Self-determination and
Sovereignty Struggle.

The 23rd day of September every year is the day that we Yoruba now celebrate as our “YORUBA UNITY DAY”. This day deserves that great name. It is on this day, September 23, 1886, that many Yoruba Obas and many of the greatest Yoruba warriors appended their signatures or thumb prints to the peace treaty that put an end to the Kiriji War, the war that had been going on in our land for many years. The importance of that document, the Treaty of Peace 1886, is that it is the only document anywhere in the world that bears the signatures of Yoruba rulers and leaders of the era when we Yoruba were still ruler of our nation. It is therefore a document of tremendous importance, and the day that it was signed is a day of tremendous importance also.

So, I congratulate the whole Yoruba nation for this great Day of Unity. I congratulate our Yoruba Nation because we are celebrating something that is infinitely important in our history. And I congratulate our men and women who have put energy together to lead us into the celebration of the great day today. I pray that God may reward you and bless you for honoring the Yoruba Nation the way you are doing now, and that God may make you persons of importance in our land, both you and your children forever.

My most important thought today is that we Yoruba should not just celebrate this day of unity, but should think seriously about the need for unity in our nation. God made our Yoruba Nation a great nation and a great people, a people with enormous capabilities. By all measures of national greatness, the Yoruba nation is a great and powerful nation. Unfortunately, however, in our remembered history, we have done a lot of things that have negated and destroyed unity among us. Consequently, we have a long record of national failures resulting from division and loss of unity among us.

I will give some examples. The greatest achievement of the Yoruba nation was the creation of the Oyo Empire, the greatest empire ever in the history of West Africa, the greatest achievement of the Yoruba nation in history before the coming of the European colonialism. It was an empire that spread from the banks of the River Niger all the way to the coast in the areas that are now call Benin Republic and Togo Republic, and it included large parts of the Yoruba territories that are now part of Nigeria. There were Yoruba areas where the Oyo Empire did not cover. It did not cover the territories of the Ekiti, Ijesha, Owo, Akoko, Ife, Ijebu, Ondo. But even in those areas it was highly respected. It was a truly great achievement of the Yoruba people.

But it was destroyed by serious divisions and loss of unity among its most eminent leaders. The unity that had created the empire was lost in the late 18th century and Yoruba leaders of the Oyo Empire began to quarrel and fight among them. Finally, there emerged a man in Ilorin, a prominent leader known as Afonja, the local ruler of Ilorin who was made the Are ona Kankanfo of the

Oyo Empire. From Ilorin Afonja then took a number of disastrous steps in his insatiable ambition to promote his personal greatness. He became so hungry for personal relevance and greatness that he embarked upon an attempt to destroy the Oyo Empire and to create an empire of his own with its capital town in Ilorin. Step by step Afonja created the situation that led to the destruction of the Oyo Empire. We Yoruba tell stories today that it was the Fulani Fulani that destroyed the Oyo Empire, but that is not true. The Fulani were no more than a handful of people in Ilorin. It was Afonja that set up an itinerant Fulani peddler of charms named Alimi as a charm maker for his army in Ilorin and thus started him on the rise to importance in Ilorin. It was prominent Yoruba leaders of Afonja's army, after Afonja's death that made Alimi's son, Abdulsalam, the first Emir of Ilorin. These Yoruba military rulers did this because they were Muslims, and because they believed that having an Emir in Ilorin was a great sign of the victory of their Islamic religion in Ilorin. The Fulani never became more than a handful of people in Ilorin. Ilorin was, and is, almost totally a Yoruba town.

In short, it was Yoruba leaders who thought of themselves as more important than their Yoruba nation that did the harms that destroyed Oyo Empire. The Oyo empire was never invaded from outside by anybody. It was Yoruba leaders who thought of themselves and their religion as more important than their Yoruba nation that installed a Fulani as Emir over Ilorin. All the disruption and destruction that happened was the handiwork of important Yoruba men from within.

Then, when it looked like everything was lost, numbers of people

gathered to go and reverse the situation and drive the foreigners out of Ilorin. All their attempts failed because these Yoruba patriots were never able to remain united against Ilorin.

Finally, in 1835 one great Alafin, the Alafin Oluewu, a brilliant warrior before he became a king, decided to go and change the situation. He led a large army towards Ilorin. On his way to Ilorin, he went through many Oyo towns and brought large numbers of people, including Obas, Baales and warriors with him. When his army arrived outside the wall of Ilorin, Ilorin people were frightened and even their Fulani Emir got ready to flee from the town.

But then, the night before the decisive battle, the followers of the great king Alafin Oluewu began to quarrel among them. The usual Yoruba spirit of division took over. Different groups began to put up all sorts of irresponsible and strange reasons why they would not fight for the Alafin Oluewu. For instance, the Alafin had succeeded in inviting some of Ibariba people to come and fight for him in Ilorin, but when the Ibariba troops came, some of the Yoruba leaders said they would not fight side by side with the Ibariba. When the morning of the battle came, Oluewu found that many of his people were no longer ready to fight for him. He could have cancelled the war and return to Oyo-Ile, but he was not the kind of person who could be frightened or who could be driven back. So he plunged into the battle with his son. Very large numbers of fighters fell on both sides. That day was a bad day for the Yoruba nation. The Alafin died in the battle and his son died as well. Ilorin became more firmly established in the hands of its Fulani ruler.

Then the Fulani rulers, and the great Yoruba military leaders of Ilorin, mobilized the Ilorin, the descendants of the Afonja army which had become the most powerful army in Yorubaland, and decided to conquer Yorubaland for Islam. They bragged that they were going to conquer new Oyo and then Ibadan, Ijaye, Ijebu, Abeokuta, and then go on and deep Quraan in the sea. They came as far as Osogbo. But thank God that the Ibadan chiefs gathered their army and went to meet them in Osogbo. There, Ibadan roundly defeated them, destroyed their whole army and captured all their leaders, and took them captive to Ibadan for trial.

It is notable what the Ibadan chiefs did at that point. When they were about to try the Ilorin's chiefs who had been captured in battle, they found that there were a few of Fulani among them. So they said to them, "We have no problem with you Fulani. Since you are not Yoruba people, it does not shock us if you choose to attack our land". So they liberated the few Fulani and sent them away. But they descended heavily on the large number of captured Yoruba leaders, men belonging by blood and duty to the Yoruba nation, and tried them one by one. Each was declared guilty before God and man for attempting to conquer their own nation for foreigners, and each received the terrible punishment that they deserved, most them receiving the death penalty. I once said in a television program about two years ago that we Yoruba owe the city of Ibadan a great debt of gratitude for what Ibadan did for our nation in 1840, and that our Yoruba nation will pay that debt some day. Yes, by the grace of God, we shall pay that debt some day.

Even after those great events of 1840, we Yoruba continued to

give expression, might and mane to our usual division. And we fought wars for years after that. One of those wars, the Kiriji War, involved most of Yorubaland, and went on for many years, until it finally ended with the Treaty of Peace in 1886.

Soon after 1886, a new era began in Africa. European countries came scrambling for territories and establishing empires all over Africa. In that new situation, our Yoruba nation was confronted by its destiny. As I said before, the Yoruba nation is a powerful nation; God made us a powerful nation. We were strong enough at that time to push the Europeans away and to sustain our freedom and sovereignty. Some people will say we could not have won because we were not a single country but many different kingdoms at that time. Yes, we were many kingdoms. But we were like the Germans; the Germans were not one single country until 1871. They were more than 300 little kingdoms and municipalities. But they decided to unite, to surrender the sovereignties of their many states and become one united Germany. And they accomplished that in 1871. That is what we Yoruba could easily have done when we were faced with the threat of European imperialism. We did not do it. The only military victory that the British won in our land was won against the powerful kingdom of Ijebu Ode in 1892. When the British forces came, Ijebu Ode people were ready to fight them, and they fought like great warriors until the British managed to bring some new weapons that made it possible for them to defeat the Ijebu-Ode army.

Now, the big thing about that terrible day in the history of Yoruba people is that on that day when Ijebu-Ode was fighting bravely,

Ijebu-Ode did not have to fight alone. There were powerful armies all over Yorubaland, altogether amounting to over half a million well trained and seasoned troops. Ibadan alone had over 80,000 troops in Ibadan town, another 25,000 in Oru in Remo, another 35,000 facing Abeokuta, and some more in other locations. Abeokuta had about 45,000 military all of them well armed. The Ekitiparapo that had fought the Ibadan until 1886 had 65,000 troops in Imesi ile and some other troops in some other locations. The Ife kingdom had about 35,000 troops in Ifetedo, and the Ondo kingdom also had about 35,000 in Okegbo. The Owo kingdom had about 30,000. And so, when I counted all these together, I found that we Yoruba had on our soil on the day when Ijebu-Ode was fighting alone against the British imperialists over half a million troops, all of them seasoned troops and armed with sophisticated imported weapons. We Yoruba could have easily defeated them by simply massing our troops from all directions into Ijebu-Ode, but we did not do it because we did not have unity. And so, we lost our right to rule ourselves, we lost our sovereignty.

In fact, by 1892 when Ijebu-Ode was fighting against the British, we Yoruba were already a considerably great nation in the world. We were the most educated people on the Africa continent. When the white missionaries brought education to Africa in about 1840, we Yoruba immediately took advantage of it. And by the 1860s we were already producing university graduates in every imaginable discipline. We had newspapers in Lagos and other towns, newspapers owned by Yoruba people and manned by Yoruba editors and reporters. We had many senior clergymen at home and abroad, and many highly educated professionals who could

easily have served as diplomats for us .We had very rich traders in Lagos some of who owned shipping lines of their own. These are great elements of national power, but we never used them to defend ourselves and we became subject of the British. We never tried to unite and sustain our sovereignty. At that same time, the kingdom of Ethiopia in another part of Africa, succeeded in mobilizing men from various parts of its country, and pushed the Italian forces out of their land. Ethiopia was by no means as strong, as educated, or as militarily powerful as our Yoruba nation. We lost because we could not unite. And so, we lost our right to rule ourselves, we lost our sovereignty. Within a year after the battle in Ijebu-ode, British officials came all over our country as residents in Ibadan, in Oyo, in ijesh, Ekiti, etc. We became subjects of the British. We did not have to have become subjects of anybody. We were strong enough to sustain our sovereignty and to become a great nation in the world. We lost because we would not unite.

Then in 1914 the British pushed us together with some other peoples into a country which they name Nigeria. In the 1950s, a bright light shone out of the heart of the Yoruba people and produced a man called Obafemi Awolowo who then gathered people together to create the most achieving government on the Africa continent in that decade of the 1950s, the years before independence. But the British didn't like us Yoruba people and the reason is simple - "self-interest", their own self-interest. When they came, we Yoruba were already highly educated. The British therefore feared us and did not want us to have any influence in Nigeria because they feared that this highly educated Yoruba

people would not let them exploit Nigeria as fully as they wished. They found a less educated people to choose as their friendly people and to give power to. Chief Awolowo fought like a titan in 1959 for the election of 1959, the election that would decide who would rule Nigeria after independence. And he won, but the British decided to rig it against him, and they rigged it for the Fulani Northerners. This is no conjecture. The British official who led the rigging of the election has written a book to tell the story of how it was done. Many of us know about that book. He wrote that the British Governor General of Nigeria called him one morning and said that the duty of the British administration in Nigeria was to rig the election for the Northerners. He wrote that the Governor General then appointed him to lead the rigging. He wrote that the British officials then went on and rigged the election for the Northerners. Even at the independent celebration some months later, Chief Awolowo was not given the respect due to him. He was disrespected.

Soon after independence the British and the Fulani whom they had handed power to began to plan how the Fulani were going to be able to sustain their hegemony over Nigeria. The British had rigged the election of 1959 for them, but there was fear that when another election would come in 1964, the Northerners would not be able to sustain their position against Chief Awolowo with the support of his powerful Western Region. So, the answer of the British and the Fulani was to disrupt the Western Region. That is what happened in 1962. Chief Akintola allowed himself to be used to disrupt our region and then the Federal Government under the Fulani came and declared that law and order had broken up in the

Western Region, declared a state of emergency over the Western Region, suspended the constitution and the elected government of the Western Region, and imposed a sole administrator. Then they accused Chief Awolowo of attempting to overthrow the government of Nigeria by force. Their immediate intention was to manipulate a case of treason against him and execute him – since the penalty for treason is execution. However, some influential people in Britain intervened and the charge was changed to something less than treason. It was changed to treasonable felony whose penalty is imprisonment. And our father Awolowo was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The terrible thing about the whole 1962- 1965 situation is not what the Fulani and the British did to us, but what our own men, our own fathers, our own leaders, did to our nation. They broke into widely irreconcilable fragments. When some of us young people went to visit them to appeal to them, they were all telling lies against Awolowo. Very obviously, it was not Chief Awolowo that was doing any evil, but that was what our fathers and leaders chose to believe. Our leaders' choice of disunity was very strong. We Yoruba have been suffering in Nigeria ever since then.

It is time for us Yoruba people to wake up and be the strong nation that God made us to be. God made us to be a great nation, a great people, with great intellect, with great capabilities. Let us wake up, and unite to save our land.

Even in today's terrible situation when our Yoruba nation has become an enslaved nation in Nigeria, our story of disunity is still going on. Large crowds of our young people, tired of the

disruption and disease and death and hopelessness of Nigeria decided that it was time for the Yoruba Nation to leave Nigeria, and they started a Yoruba self determination struggle. But we had hardly started when we broke into pieces and began to fight one another, to abuse one another, to tell lies against one another, to curse one another, and to say abominable things about one another. It continues till today. And some of our people are talking of appointing more Yoruba leaders. How can more leaders be a reasonable answer to our nation's terrible situation in Nigeria today?

We are an enslaved people in Nigeria and what we need is that all of us should join hands together, stand together, and take our nation from Nigeria. That is what we need, and we need it desperately. What we need is patriots who will stand up, men and women who will take our nation out of Nigeria. We have suffered enough in Nigeria. Our education has been destroyed. Our young people who went through school, universities and colleges are left hopeless and neglected. Large numbers of our youths are fleeing to other countries, and many of these do not intend ever to return. Very many are choosing the extremely hazardous option of running cross the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea to get to Europe, and many of them are dying in the desert and in the Mediterranean Sea. Many of those who remain at home are forced to go into crime, criminal cults, internet crime, drug abuse, ritual murders for money, etc.

It is time for us to take ourselves out of Nigeria and build our own country, and make it the prosperous country that we Yoruba know how to build. We have the capability to do it.

So, let us make the celebration of today a celebration that our whole Yoruba nation will happily remember for all our future. Let it be the occasion for all of us Yoruba people to say enough is enough about disunity among us. Let of us make today the day when every one of us make it a personal duty to spread the message to all our people that what our Yoruba nation desperately needs is to stand together and join hands to free our Yoruba people from the deepening poverty of Nigeria and the hopelessness of Nigeria. For all of us Yoruba people, this is the task of the moment.

I wish the Yoruba nation wisdom and unity. I wish that we will achieve our unity and our freedom and then go on and build ourselves into a prosperous and great country in the world.

Again, I say thank you to those who have led us in putting together the arrangements of today.

Thank you too to all who have kept this ceremony of 23rd of September going in the past many years. But let us create a new thing today - a determination to unite and free ourselves.

Thank you all very much. May God bless Odudua, the Yoruba nation and every man, woman and child of the Yoruba people. Thank you all.