

## **15<sup>th</sup> Founder's Day Lecture**

**KEYNOTE SPEECH** on the **AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (AUN) 15<sup>th</sup> FOUNDER'S DAY** in honor of the Founder of the University and former Nigeria's Vice President, **H.E. ATIKU ABUBAKAR, GCON**, delivered by **Distinguished Professor Umezuruike Linus Opara**, PhD CEng CFS FIAgrE FSAIAE FNIAE, on Friday, November 25, 2022.

I would like to acknowledge the President of this University, Prof. Attahir Yusuf and his family. I say this because this is a man that I've known personally, and also professionally, for so many decades that when I mention it, you would be wondering my age; and I don't want go there. So, Prof. Attahir Yusuf, I thank you so much and the university management for giving me the honor and inviting me to be here with you today. I should also make a statement about Dr. Attahir Yusuf.

Today is about this university and the founder, but just to have him here as your Interim President, somebody that I've known and worked with in three different continents: New Zealand, in the Middle East, and here (referring to Africa). I think our country is very, very lucky and blessed that he is prepared to come back and serve our country Nigeria.

I want to thank the protocol team. Mr. Usuh Usuh, and your team for making me really welcomed and looking after me, I thank you very much. I want to specially recognize the students. I spent a very good time with the student union leaders today. If you're here, I just want to see where you are. I just want to make sure some of you are here; thank you very much for the time we spent together.

The reason I am doing this is because I felt highly inspired by the time I spent with the students. It reminded me of many, many years back when I was in Student Government Union in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; and continued the same at Macy University in New Zealand.

When I was invited by the President/Vice Chancellor of AUN to present this lecture, I felt very, very humbled. I felt very, very honored as well. This was for several reasons, the first one is the person that we are celebrating today. The vision of that person, His Excellency, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, GCON, the fact that I am associated with the university that he has envisioned, and also brought to reality is something that I'll always remember as honor to myself. So, I want to thank the university for giving me that honor.

This man that we celebrate today, the institution he has built has been at the forefront of promoting and harnessing education for human and economic development. Those of us who have followed his life over the years, even when we are outside the country, it is something that we are very proud of, and particularly very proud to come close to stay in this institution to make this presentation. Am also very, very pleased and delighted because of my history with Yola, with what I actually call my destiny with Yola. While I was sitting here, I was taking some photos and videos and sending it to my wife in New Zealand and my daughter in South Africa. My good friend, the President was looking at me and was wondering what I was trying to do, I said I have to tell them where I am and what I was doing.

I talk about my history and destiny in Yola, because it's just about myself, but my entire family, the Opara family. We started in the 1970s, so what a joyful home coming to be here and celebrate with you on the Founder's Day of the American University of Nigeria, Yola. And also to celebrate and recognize the remarkable impact of this singular vision of a man, of a person for a better Yola, for a better Adamawa, for a better Nigeria, Africa and the world at large.

When I talk about this destiny with Yola and Adamawa, I want the young people here to listen, because as I mentioned earlier, I really enjoyed the time I spent with the Student Union officials today. It all started in Yola here for me. As a young man, I finished high school in 1980s or there about. My dad asked me to come to Yola. I was very close to my dad; I was very happy as I was looking forward to my result coming out and going to the university. I was actually somewhere in Tafida Street, Yola, and the news came out that our results, our school certificate results have been cancelled.

I had to go to school, and I had this conversation with my dad about what I was going to do, and my dad told me there was no money. So, I was lucky that I had already sat for my School Cert. even though I didn't have result; that I better go and start doing something, "here is Jimeta, go out young man and survive", and of course I did. I got a job with UTC. Older people like me would remember UTC, after airport, on the way to Numan. I got a job there as a sales man, I was selling iron bunkers, tools, nails, doors, all those kind of this, toilet wares. And one of those remarkable experiences that I had was that somebody walked into our stall with his Personal Assistant called Dokpesi, and I was asked by the Supervisor to go and attend to that man, and I spent about 15 minutes showing that man the stall only to realize he was coming to contest for the Governorship of Gongola State in those days, and of course I served him and he was very happy and offered me a job, and I said I was going to a university to study.

I spent two years working as a sales man here in Yola, saving money to go to the university, because there was no money. Two years, the money was not coming enough and I took GCE; Federal Government Girls College was the examination center. I used to sneak from work to go for exams. In fact, I missed one of the exams because my

supervisor wouldn't give me permission. I want the young people here to listen because, you must have a purpose. You must be determined in order for you to succeed. Because my father used to tell us that you can complain of the side of the bed somebody laid you or put you down on, you can complain the time of the night the person lifted you and put you on the bed, but you cannot complain of not turning when that part of bed became painful, and that was what we did here in Yola.

It was not just about myself, during my time in UTC, I had the opportunity of meeting a lot of people. For the first time, I saw a real commercial farm. Not the small holder agriculture I was practising in my village. Somewhere along the Numan road, there was a maize farm, hundreds of hectares, and they used to come and buy materials from us at UTC. So, one of those days I asked the person, he was an English man, I said I wanted to go to where you are and he took me to the farm. The was the first day I saw tractors functioning. Here in Yola, between Yola and Numan, there were harvesters, combined harvesters. They were harvesting corn in Nigeria. I'm talking about 1980 and 1981.

Is it not surprising that when I took JAMB, I put Agricultural Engineering, here, from Yola here. So, Yola has been good to me, my mother was also here in Yola. My father worked at Cubic's, one of the construction companies that came to build the old Gongola State. He was an Office Manager, he only had Primary 6 but they gave him the opportunity to work there, and from there he joined Federal Polytechnics, here in Yola and became the pioneer staff that move the Polytechnics to Mubi. So, I used to travel between Yola and Mubi for weekends to go and spend time with my dad. How I wish I could still do that today in the country that I love so much - Nigeria.

My brother also joined us here in Yola. My younger brother was selling food stuff in Jimeta market, and now has a PhD and lives in Australia with his family. My other brothers also learned several trades which has carried them forward. So, that is my personal story with Yola.

Fast forward, more than forty years later, here I am. Just think about it that if in 1980 that was American University of Nigeria in Yola, just think about it. I am talking to the young people here.

At that time when I was writing JAMB, the first time I took JAMB, because there was no result, but I put Federal Polytechnics, Yola. The next one I was going to put was University of Maiduguri because that was the nearest one. The next institution in Yola as at that time was either the School of Arts and Sciences or Preparatory College somewhere in Yola. That was Yola forty-two years ago.

Today, we have world a class institution with world class academia, with world class infrastructure which I have been very fortunate to see in the last three days. What an opportunity, and for the young people who are studying here, what a privilege that you have. Trust me, and Prof. Attahir can attest to this, that the various universities we have

worked and served in South Pacific, in Europe, in the Middle East, in North America, trust me, you can be very proud that you are in one of the bests academic institutions in the world.

So, in this lecture, we have to celebrate the life of our founder here. A life of a remarkable man. We want to celebrate his life and his vision that he has, but at the same time, we want to remind ourselves the need to serve also, to plough back into our communities. This is the example that he is showing us. I consider him to be a trail blazer, because it was Nelson Mandela, the late President of South Africa that freed the people of South African from the shackles of Apartheid, who said that it is only education that can make the children of the house-help to aspire and become President of this country. It is the same Mandela who said, it's only education that can make a son of a mine worker to aspire to become a President of a country. So, while we celebrate these achievements and successes that have been recorded, I want us also to celebrate the partners, collaborators who have worked with His Excellency. We also need to celebrate the faculty, staff, and students who have gone through this place. Who I understand, from the stories I heard, have been making their marks in the country and around the world.

As we recommit ourselves and this institution to the vision, styles, and core values of our founder. I think it is important, we remain steadfast. Eighteen years ago, and perhaps prior to that, His Excellency had a dream, he has converted that dream into reality, and each of here today, in one way or the other have become benefactors of that dream and vision. Our challenge now is how do we turn the next eighteen years into something more spectacular, impactful than the last eighteen years?

I also want to talk about the role of a university like this in development. I am very proud of the mission of the university, Africa's Development University. So, what does that mean to you as faculty, as students, and as staff. We are talking about a world that is increasingly becoming more complex with very vexing problems that no individual, no single discipline can solve on their own. This is the type of world we are talking about, where education is not easily accessible to the majority of the people; where good health is not accessible to the majority of the people; where some of the basic needs we take for granted on a daily basis, the majority of our people are not able to access them. So, what role can a university like this play, how can we go about doing it? We also do know, that one of the things, one of the challenges that have been holding our country and our continent down is what we call rural development, if I may put it that way. And when we talk about rural development, in African context, we are basically talking about agricultural development.

This is a liberal university, following the American model. I was in the library yesterday, and I saw a section, I saw some books that say Agricultural Sciences, and I said, do you offer agricultural science here, and they said no. I asked that question very deliberately. I was happy because textbooks in other disciplines are available for the young people to

read and understand, to think of how they deploy their knowledge to solve practical problems. So, development is not all about theory, development is about human beings, it's about people. Development is also about our resources, our natural resources. How do we utilize them in a sustainable manner to make positive impact on the daily lives of our people?

So, how do we start doing this? The first way to start is to have a globally competitive university like this, because this is about human capital. In South Africa, where they present all these adulations and celebrate you, I always asked, why would a top class university in South Africa, predominantly Whites' university invite me to become a distinguished Professor while I was in the Middle East? I have never worked in South Africa before. Am I a Nigerian, with all the positives and negatives about us. What was special about me? I don't think there was anything special about me. Perhaps, they saw some opportunity where I could deploy some skills to benefit South Africa.

I could have been a palm wine tapper or a hunter in my village but today what is the difference between me and my peers in the village? It is education. So the socio-economic impact of this institution like AUN is difficult to measure. Atiku Abubakar just has to think about it this way that if we can manage to change the life of one boy or girl with this institution then we can change Nigeria. It takes one person to take a stand and this is the beauty of an institution like this. This is a dream. I mean last night I couldn't sleep, I kept wondering, am I in Nigeria? if I had access to just 0.001 percent of the infrastructure that the staff and students have here, if any of you could have come to my laptop, Prof. Attahiru will tell you, one small unit in the basement of Stellenbosch university and that is where we still produce the highest number of impact Factor papers on the whole continent, still ranked among the top 1% in the whole world. So one little space with all the challenges of power supply in South Africa and here I see the generators booming all day, the internet access is everywhere, look at the library, the study space, the environment where you can take a walk, I don't see any rubbish dump here. I've spent the last five years at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and have traveled to many universities in the country. When you compare them to AUN you will feel like you are living on a different planet. We have to be aware of this because if the people who are studying and working here do not realize the importance of this institution then we will not be able to harness the full potential of this university. After I got my university education I had the opportunity of spending time in the United Nations and that is very important because I wanted to see the policy aspect of development. During the time of Saddam Hussein, I spent one year in Iraq, advising the UN on oil for food programs and agriculture from there. This is about the development aspect of education, this is about the application of research and innovation, marrying scientific knowledge, education with economic development.

The next component related to this is the entrepreneurship part. I've spent a lot of time trying to read and understand the curriculum to understand the philosophy here. I've interacted with students and faculty and I can say that you have something special here. The issue of business is something that if we don't hang on to it we will be talking about potentials and I think that we should go past the issue of potentials in Nigeria.

So what is the role of a liberal university such as AUN, in transforming Agriculture for widespread sustainable agricultural development? Firstly, it starts with people, we need people who are skilled who understand what is possible. One of the problems we have in leadership is that we have a lot of people who work hard on their own and get to leadership but many of them do not have the envisioning of what is possible beyond today's challenges. We need people who know what is possible. And that's what we need to do about economic development and that's where entrepreneurship comes in, with people who have a vested interest to make economic gains by taking risks. When we talk about statistics, you hear that about 80% of food that is consumed in Africa is produced by small holder farmers and about 60 to 70% of our people are into smallholder agriculture. So what happens in policy and investment is that we must support small holder farmers. The challenge for liberal institutions is that you don't need to be in agriculture to develop policies and technology on how to radically transform agriculture into an economic business unit.

Our founder, 18 years ago, thought about an institution that can train people to have critical thinking beyond their individual discipline, now over the years the area of discipline has been growing but i want to think beyond the four walls of this university and look at Jimeta, Hong, Song and Numan and see what are the economic activities of such areas, how can institutions like this radically change their economic fortunes? A simple app developed here can actually transform the agriculture of Adamawa state. And I've done my scientific research at this institution and I can see the trajectory of research topics by academics published over the years. I can see the change in these topics. Now we are talking about machine learning and artificial intelligence. It is happening here in this institution, how can we deploy this economically, effectively to transform smallholder agriculture for economic development? It is not possible that the majority of our people will engage in an enterprise where they cannot look after themselves and if they come from a family like mine you still have to pay their children's school fees and you tell me they are economically engaged? We have to do something. We have to think about technology. What technology can improve productivity on the farm? What technology can add value along the value chain? The global average of the amount on consumer items that goes back to the farmer is 15% the rest goes to post harvest. If we can invest and improve the post production side and create a demand for what we eat and enjoy then



there may be more incentives for people to improve the production side. We need to know how we can grow our neglected food crops into the global mainstream. Building commercial farms, hiring people with skills like AUN, hiring accountants, crop scientists, ICT specialists, marketing specialists, entrepreneurs, people who can develop business proposals etc Agriculture is not just about tilling the soil, we have to change that story and AUN has a role to play in that. With innovation and research, technology and business proposals, people are likely going to listen to you more than some of the old traditions. I can see you are doing so well in telecommunications and ICT; how can we use that to improve our value chains. These are opportunities knocking on your doors.

The future of agriculture cannot be in the hands of smallholder farmers. We are talking about inputs, markets and marketing, regulations, sanitary issues, policy issues, land access, understanding consumers. Think about it, we need professional hands on deck to drive rural development, there is also opportunity for training and capacity building. We have to think beyond farming and think about agribusiness.

In conclusion, I want to talk about sustaining the development that AUN has achieved and also deepening the impact. What now and what next? In 18 years, Yola has created AUN through a son of the soil. My question to you now is in the next 18 years what will AUN make Yola, Adamawa state and Nigeria to be? This is a question for staff, students and friends of AUN. Some years ago, the Federal Polytechnic in Mubi was the highest academic institution in Gongola state, today we have several tertiary institutions in Adamawa state, in my view, with AUN leading so what opportunities are there for innovative ecosystems, for collaborations between these institutions that will fuel the industrialization of Adamawa state? Who is championing this? Perhaps a good opportunity for research and innovation at AUN. It is on record that 60% of globally uncultivated land is in Africa but I also know that this university, through the generosity of its founder is endowed with about 2500 hectares of land but I don't know what percentage of it is being utilized. What are you going to be doing to turn those resources into value propositions so that the financial independence and sustainability of the institution can be enhanced. What business and entrepreneurship opportunities are locked up in this underutilized resources?

In terms of research, there is a trend. I spent some time using some software to map the research history of this university and I can see a very clear trajectory, an evolution, a movement from forecasting to decision making to plastic recycling to information systems and so on. What is the niche of AUN in research which can begin to have impact in Yola? What will be about research in AUN that anyone in the northeast will say go to

AUN they are the leaders? This is something to think about because the benefit of that is not only in research and development but also in attracting talent, even among undergraduates. I always ask the young people when they talk about which university to attend. When they hear Harvard, you don't need to add the word 'university', people don't care where it is, they say it is a good university. What is it about Harvard? It is about credibility. So after 18 years, what are the critical areas that AUN will be known for? Investments have been made and opportunities are tremendous and these are some of the areas that I think that the university should be looking at going forward. Thank you for listening.

The relationship between knowledge, research, education and economic development have been proven over time. What is required now are dedicated people who are prepared to envision what is possible. The founder of this university has shown what is possible by envisioning a university in what I may call a dry land. Today we are seated in a citadel of learning that can compare with the best in the world, with infrastructure, human capital and bright young minds. The challenge for the next 18 years is to envision what is possible beyond the initial vision of His Excellency Alhaji Atiku Abubakar.