

An Address Presented by **Oronto Douglas**

At the Nembe Ibe USA 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convention

Newark New Jersey USA, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2010.

Theme: *“A Case for Unity, Health Care, Education and Economic Development of NEMBE IBE”*.

## **PROTOCOL**

It is a thing of immense joy to be so honored to address one of the most pressing issues of collective concern to our people. The challenge of unity in Nembe and the emergent developmental challenges command serious concern not only to the people of Bayelsa East Senatorial District, Bayelsa State, but also the entire Ijaw race, the Niger Delta and Nigeria.

Those who are abreast of historical development in pre independence Nigeria will attest to the incontestable fact that Nembe has a rich history that clothed the Ijaw nation in apparels of self esteem, bravery, industriousness, creativity, ingenuity and other virtues. It is apposite to mention, without exaggeration, that this story of Nembe-Ibe occupies a huge and strategic place in the heart of every Ijaw.

The resilience and unity depicted in the rich history of Nembe at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century does not have provision for internal animosity, bitterness, detrimental rivalry and vendetta. Authoritative historical sources including our own master historian, Prof. Ebiegberi Alagoa, recalled how a unified Nembe under King Koko successfully

coordinated one of the first major recorded resistance to British Imperialism which set Nigeria on the path to independence and self governance in February 1895.

As far back as the 1870s, the people of Nembe had firmly demonstrated their abilities as businessmen of repute by strategically positioning themselves as the middlemen between the producers of palm oil in the hinterland and the Europeans operating in the coast. While other nations in Nigeria were still grappling with the rudiments of existence at a subsistence level the people of Nembe were in communication with other nations on equal terms.

We were told that this history of equality was fraudulently disrupted by the Royal Niger Company who attempted to institute a monopoly in the palm oil trade against the wishes and aspiration of the Nembe people who had preferred fair trade. The brazen attempt by Taubman Goldie's agents to establish direct links with the hinterland and bypass and undermine the people of Nembe, led to the well recorded resistance by the people under King Koko. The Patriots of Nembe under King Koko' who undertook a preemptive and preventive attack on the Royal Niger Company offices at Akassa represents the earliest attempt by people in Africa against unacceptable economic oppression.

Distinguished Ladies and gentlemen, the major preoccupation here is not to deliver a lecture on Nembe history and achievement, but to refresh our memories that this is one great people that have been identified with great exploits in the past.

*When many communities found solace in obscurity and opted out of the sacrifices and events that shaped what has become the story of the Niger Delta and Nigeria, Nembe was at the driving seat. The story of Nembe is a soothing song of civilization to our country men and women. It is a*

*story of great inspiration that must remind us that it can be done and we have the wherewithal to do it.*

Shortly after Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther translated the Bible into his native Yoruba Language, our own Rev. Ogiriki Okia, followed suit with a creative translation of the Bible into Nembe, one of the major dialects of the Ijaw Language.

It is therefore interesting to ask: if the story of Nembe was shaped by great things in the past, shouldn't it be sustained today? We cannot afford to put ourselves on the negative side of the judgment of posterity. We must take the necessary steps to douse the embers of strife and disunity threatening to obliterate this great heritage. It is incontrovertible to state here that the facts of our historical existence built on productive communal spirit, hard work and love are stronger than today's differences and disagreements. The search for unity is a clarion call to which all Nembe people, young and old, male and female, must obey. We have to prove to the world that Nembe whose land produces hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil per day can resolve its internal squabbles, which is of course, a common phenomenon in all human societies. A fight between brothers should not be allowed to run deep into the terrain of a vendetta which is nurtured into immeasurable and unquantifiable damage to the development of our people.

A disagreement among sisters must end with warm embrace of love, understanding and forgiveness. Our children must be spared the anguish and pain of the present.

It is in this regard that I want to commend the steps taking by the Nembe Ibe USA on its historic mission of building peace, encouraging educational advancement and advocating for the rapid development of Nembe Ibe.

Like all human societies, Nembe is in dire need of development. In fact Nembe should be blazing the trail in the area of development considering its strategic economic importance as a major oil producing community in Nigeria. But can development be actualized in an environment of strife?

Public perception of the situation in Nembe should challenge us to take the steps to reinvent and recreate the great exploits for which our great ancestors were famous. We are duty-bound to prove to the contrary the impression created out there that peace and security in Nembe land is impossible. Let me recall what a reporter in one of the National Dailies back home wrote about our people which we must consign to the dustbin by making just a little effort:

*“They are from the same stock yet they hardly see eye to eye. They speak the same language but they refuse to talk to each other. They intermarry, yet they go to great heights to pull one another down. For the people of Nembe Bassambiri and Nembe Ogbolomabiri, their relationship has always been like that of the proverbial cat and mouse.”*

The above must not be allowed to be a true representation of our ability to forgive, love and care. We must take that deliberate rational step to disprove this ugly characterization that threatens Nembe Ibe capacity to advance into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a happy and great people.

Economically Nembe Ibe is ready. The Nembe World has been ready for decades! Today it is set to become home to the proposed Brass Liquidified Natural Gas Plant and other associated industries. With peace and security in the land, other vital steps needed to realise the intrinsic potentials of the people will be unveiled. I believe that the time has come for us to explore how we can fully exploit the opportunities offered by the establishment of these important economic facilities in

our land. We must learn from the mistakes of the last fifty years when we focus on in fighting while the exploitation of the resources of Nembe Ibe went on unchallenged. Wherever King Fredrick William Koko is, he will be in a shock! Let's do our best. The time has come for us to forge an iron cast unity from Ogbolomabiri to Bassambiri; from Beletiana to Liama; from Okpoama to Twon.

While we lose hundreds to communal conflicts, thousands die from preventable conditions and diseases. We must be challenged by the unacceptable inclusion of Nembe among communities that suffer alarming maternal mortality, and strive to pull our resources together into the project of securing the lives of our people from avoidable deaths.

To chart a road map for Nembe's development and advancement the youths must take the lead. Special focus must be placed in molding a generation of youths who will not be tied to the apron strings of previous quarrels and conflicts and who will be focused in leading the vanguard for unity and educational excellence. How many of us here are willing to forgive and insist on a new beginning? There are other challenging issues awaiting our urgent attention even as we prepare to confront some urgent external threats.

In our present world, serious issues emanating from the hazards of oil production, gas flaring, ecological devastation and water and air pollution have become a feature of the daily lives of communities from the Gulf of Guinea to the Gulf of Mexico and from Bayelsa to Florida.

I am sure that everybody in this hall is gravely concerned by reports of occurrences of diseases hitherto unknown in our land. We must be in the lead of campaigns to bring an end to the decimation of our people by such illnesses. The need for an effective health delivery system backed

by government and citizens whether at home or in the diaspora has become urgent.

Closely related to the imperative of a solid healthcare arrangement that should be responsive to the needs of our people is a painstakingly designed and faithfully implemented education of our people designed to create the opportunity for them to play a deserving role in leadership and development of our country and our continent. I hold the view that education in Nembe, Bayelsa and Nigeria ought to be free. I believe that the progress made by the Yoruba of Nigeria is due largely to the free education programme instituted by Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

Lastly, there is no hiding from the fact that when the drumbeat of communal acrimony is over, the people of Nembe will depend on posterity to defend and sustain the enviable legacies of our founding ancestors. It is against this backdrop that we need to give the deserved attention to the need to sustain our culture and our heritage. One of the most effective ways those of us in the Diaspora can achieve this, is by speaking our language to our children. The Nembe language with its rich poetry, deep idioms and inherent entertainment attributes must not be allowed to go the way of strife and alienation. Literary and intellectual giants in the mould of Ernest Ikoli and Ola Rotimi grew out of it and many who are living and will achieve are dependent on it. What God has given to Nembe must be protected by the present for the sake of the future our people.

I thank you for your kind attention.