

ALL IJAW SUMMIT

MAIN THEME: THE NIGERIAN STATE & IJAW QUESTION

“The Imperatives of Ijaw Quest For Self-Determination:

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”

(a Sub-theme of the All Ijaw Summit (AIS))

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SELF-DETERMINATION IS IMPERATIVE TO THE SURVIVAL OF IJAW NATION

'IN OR OUT' OF NIGERIA

Introduction

This is to share with Ijaw Nation the word and concept of Self-Determination, the application and value of Self-Determination to different peoples and their needs, within their particular geographical environment, amongst their immediate neighbours and government.

No Ijaw daughter or son of yesterday, today and tomorrow will claim to know all that is good for the Indigenous Ijaw people of the Niger Delta Region in Nigeria, yet, at least we should contribute to the discussions.

The Ijaw people are indigenous to a geographical area created and named Nigeria, in 1914, by Lugard, a British citizen. The identity of Nigeria, imposed on us and others within the map of Nigeria, was based on our skin tone and attempts to deny us our identity, our *ijaw-ness*.

This is to affirm that our origin comes before the invasion and occupation of our lands and creeks by the colonial adventures of Great Britain centuries ago; sadly, today in Nigeria, our land and creeks remain invaded and occupied by the Federal Government and non-natives.

Yesterday it was about palm oil, access to the Atlantic Ocean, and Slave trade. In today's language it is human trafficking.

Has anything truly changed in our favour since the British Colonial invasion, more than one hundred years ago? Today it is still about Oil, Gas, access to the Atlantic Ocean, our creeks, mangroves and swamps. Has anything changed in our favour?

Our history is alive with information about when the British met the Ijaw people for the first time - they met a free people and a self-determined people, who were prepared to fight for their beliefs and rights. The style of government that the British introduced in the southern and northern protectorates, and later 'Nigeria' during the 1914 Amalgamation, they called Democracy, turns out to be 'divide and rule', not only between ethnic Nations of southern Nigeria, but sadly amongst the Ijaws. The democracy of Nigeria does not reassure trust, freedom, respect and unity within the Ijaw nation or between our geographical neighbours.

By the end of my presentation on Self-Determination, I hope we will all be able to make the choices that will change our fortunes, starting today, and further leading the fortunes of those coming behind us, to grow and build a stronger and better Ijaw nation. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that Ijaws, by culture and tradition, are a people who live by the fundamentals of what the United Nation recognises as Self Determination.

Self-Determination (Yesterday)

Self-Determination is a foreign terminology, derived from a foreign language. Looking back to the Ijaw man's *Yesterday*, we need not be told that when the British adventurers met the Ijaw man, they met indigenous people who were self-determined, by nature and culture, and when necessary fought off invaders to preserve their right to Self-Determination.

Self-Determination was the breath of life to the Ijaw man of *Yesterday*; there are stories of King Koko Mingi VIII (1853-1898), who is known as an African ruler of Nembe Kingdom in the Niger Delta, now part of Southern Nigeria.

King Koko is recorded to have attacked the Royal Niger Company's trading post in January of 1895, when he disagreed with the trading term. He was offered settlement terms which he found unacceptable and therefore rejected the terms; he was then deposed by the British until his death in 1898. Almost 130 years ago, he fought for what the British denied him and what the world recognizes today as a right - the Ijaw man was self-determined *Yesterday*, to be free.

Britain created the Oil Rivers Protectorate, controlling the Military and External Affairs; the aim was to control the palm oil trade. To achieve their plans, European traders settled on the coasts. Nembe was at the centre of the palm oil trade and refused to sign the unfair treaty with the British, and opposed the Royal Niger Company's strategy to control all trade along Nembe Kingdom rivers.

While this is not a history lesson, it is important to clarify to some who do not know, and remind others who do know, that Ijaws asking today for resource control and ownership, restructuring and self-determination, is not a first. And we should aim for this to be the last time, so that our children and their children tomorrow will not fight for the same rights as their forefathers: King Koko of Nembe, King Jaja of Opobo, Chief Harold Dappa Biriye, Dr. Fiberesima, Isaac Adaka Boro and many other Ijaws sons and daughters, Kings and Queens, fought for *Yesterday*.

At the 1957 Constitutional Conference at Lancaster House London, Chief Harold Dappa Biriye, representing the Rivers Chiefs and Peoples Conference (all of today's Rivers and Bayelsa States) argued against attempts to set up a Rivers State to be joined to Calabar or Ogoja:

"I must make it quite clear that the wishes of those whom I represent would not in any way be met by the creation of a combined Calabar/Ogoja/Rivers State. We should still be outnumbered by those whose way of life is quite different from our own." Chief Harold Dappa Biriye.

Our leaders at the 1957 Constitutional Conference, in asking for Rivers State (today's Rivers and Bayelsa States), were acting on Self-Determination, and cited Northern Ireland to bring it home to the British. Harold Dappa Biriye, on our behalf, rejected the argument that a Regional Government will be administratively and economically preferable, in the new

independent Nigeria, he says: “The Rivers Chiefs and people are still, I submit, entitled to say we want none of it. We want to handle our affairs.”

About the Constitution, he said, “I would, however, wish to make it clear that no constitutional guarantees, whether designed to protect communities or individuals, can in my view be a substitute for a separate State.”

He accepted that constitutional guarantees may be invaluable in protecting what might be described as fundamental rights, but they cannot prevent the adoption of **unfair or oppressive policies to minorities**. “That is why those whom I represent do not believe that their future can be assured except by the creation of a Rivers state.” HDB

Sixty-three years ago (Yesterday), while Biriye made those valid arguments on our behalf, little did he know that three years later, on 11th October 1960, 10 days after the colonial Union Jack was lowered and the Green White Green was hoisted as a sign of independence, that one ethnic group will burst the bubble of false independence, unity and fake brotherhood with the following statement.

Sir Ahmadu Bello:

“This new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Othman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We will use the minorities in the North as willing tools and the South as a conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over their future.” (Parrot Newspaper, October 12th 1960).

I share this because without the right information, people make wrong decisions and deal with the consequences in the process. The sentiment, and false claim of ownership of Nigeria demonstrated, was not challenged by our leaders and political elites, and now plays out vividly in Federal Government, political policies, and many arms of government.

Self-Determination (Today)

If today Ijaws are on a quest to express their Self-Determination, it is not a new phenomenon; it is in us, by our nature, to be self-determined.

Self-Determination is a Right: it is the freedom to act in your best interest, or think a certain way in your interest. It is the Right of a people to decide their political status or form of government without outside influence or interference.

Under International law, ‘minorities’, or indigenous peoples, have a right to express the freedom of their Self-Determination. If Ijaw people believe that we seek the freedom of Self-Determination *Today*, within Nigeria or outside of Nigeria (many years after the Willinks report), it can only mean that we are questing for what we had *Yesterday*. We want our freedom to act on our Self-Determination back.

Before we go further, let us ask ourselves, ‘What is the Ijaw question in the Nigerian State?’ The answer can be found in another question and that is this - ‘Who is the Ijaw man in

Nigeria, and what is Nigeria to the Ijaw man? The Ijaw man will always be an Ijaw man, he went to sleep one night in 1914 and woke up a Nigerian in the morning; he woke up as a Nigerian without consent. The Ijaw man is indigenous, aboriginal and native to the creeks, mangroves, swamps and coasts of the Niger Delta.

Indigenous peoples are people who have distinct traditions, culture, dress, religion, and language. There are over 5,000 indigenous peoples across the world; sadly, most are fighting against what the Ijaws have also fought against for over a century - injustice. We must hold onto what makes us Ijaw people in the Nigerian State. The reality of indigenous people is due to their size or geographical location; they are usually colonized by larger groups who impose racial or religious norms on them; they are denied a right of humanity, the right to be who they are.

In Nigeria, indigenous Ijaw people face threats to our sovereignty, economic well-being and access to our resources for development and a better future. To the Ijaw man, Nigeria is an oppressive imposition on him. Some may disagree with me, yet I trust that some also agree with me, as both sides of the coin are required to see the whole and move forward.

Self-Determination is a major pillar in our quest for freedom, development and security.

Our responsibility today, and for our grandchildren's future, is to strengthen our commitment to maintain ownership of our ancestral homeland and environment - this is a right to our identity. Despite the rights of indigenous people to the freedom of Self-Determination, the 1999 constitution of Nigeria enforces some grievous laws – that can be construed as anti-Ijaw rights and survival. We must identify these laws, reject these laws and remember that we had no input in the creation of the 1999 constitution. We must demand a new and just Constitution *for* the people.

Self-Determination (Tomorrow)

For 63 years (1958 -2021), the God-given resources of the Ijaw people, and all other indigenous peoples of Niger Delta, have been sucked out of the region by Nigeria and the International Oil Companies (IOCs). Before oil and gas it was palm oil, rubber and timber. The environmental destruction, especially in Ijaw land, and the negative effects it has had and threatens to have on us yesterday, today and tomorrow are incalculable. We must design a program to pursue our right to the freedom for Self-Determination now. Rising from this summit, we must begin untying our people and geographical area, legally and strategically, from internal colonisation and exploitation by the cabal. Ijaw people of the Niger Delta, if they so decide after this All Ijaw Summit, should reach out to other indigenous peoples of the Niger Delta region in a committed bid to work together and put up an emancipation program for all the indigenous peoples of the Niger Delta Region, for the survival of the people, democracy, industrialisation, security and prosperity of the region - each agreeing to play their part.

All indigenous people of the Niger Delta share historical, cultural and regional heritage, experiences and hopes. The indigenous people of our region share a lot in common, such as:

politics, economy, energy, education, science and technology, infrastructure, agriculture, transport, environment and more, for rapid and sustainable development and growth.

UNREPRESENTED NATIONS & PEOPLES ORGANIZATION (UNPO)

When one discusses the right to Self-Determination of minorities, indigenous people and ethnic nationalities, independence will not be too far behind. Before we can commit to our group Self-Determination as the best way forward for the Ijaw people, understanding Self-Determination is imperative. Self-determination is not illegal, it is not a crime, it is not secession - it is a right to our political status being freely chosen - to pursue economic, social and cultural development, freely. Many peoples who choose to pursue their self-determination are members of UNPO, and promote their rights to defend their political, social, and cultural rights, and preserve their environment. This applies to Ijaw people. Success in practising these rights should result in outcomes like political independence and state or regional integration. Nigeria's Federal Government often resists the rights of ethnic nationalities within Nigeria to gain access to these universal rights; nonetheless, the freedom to act on one's self-determination is recognised, by international law, as a right of process.

As we continue to act on the right for Self-Determination, we must not forget that on 27th September 2015, four months after President Buhari took oath of Presidential office, he spoke at the UN Summit's Knowledge Platform on Sustainable Development. To mark the 70th Anniversary in New York, he advocated the right to Self-Determination for the people of Palestine. He said, "African Countries who had that kind of agitation of becoming sovereign nations should be granted such, as there was no excuse or reason to delay them." The question is: why would he ask for the freedom of Self-Determination for the Palestinian people and vehemently oppose Nigeria Ethnic Nations calling for Self-Determination, using brute force to suppress self-determined leaders and followers of separatist's groups in Nigeria?

IJAW CALL FOR SELF-DETERMINATION IS NOW

I am convinced that the Nigerian state is no longer able to provide minimum political, social and economic security for the 389 ethnic nations that share the geographical space it occupies in West Africa. The process of government has been kidnapped by terrorist groups, encouraged by a hegemony of greedy, selfish and opportunistic men and women, ruthlessly suppressing and exploiting the true will of the Ijaw people and all other ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta region.

The Ijaw ethnic nationality and all other ethnic nations of the Niger Delta Region have been robbed of their natural resources by the instrumentalities of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, written by the outgoing military dictatorship of 1999, sharing between themselves oil blocks domiciled in the creeks, swamps, mangroves and deep waters of the coasts and communities of Ijaw nation. The survival of the Ijaw ethnic nationality is under threat by

environmental genocide waged against us by the reckless and deadly exploration and exploitation of oil and gas by the International Oil Companies (IOCs), and their Joint Venture Partners (JVP), the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as well as private oil explorers. The Ijaw ethnic nationality rejects a country where we are marginalised, oppressed and relegated to the role of second and third class positions.

MY PLEDGE TO IJAW NATION

I am not a conquered person.

I am not a stranger in Nigeria.

My forefathers and ancestors were born free.

I am free.

My children will not be enslaved.

I will not be forced into any culture or brotherhood foreign to me.

I will not beg to be a Nigerian.