

COMMENCEMENT SPEECH DELIVERED BY HIS EXCELLENCY, MR. BABATUNDE RAJI FASHOLA, SAN AT THE GRADUATION CEREMONY OF THE SKILLUP ACADEMY ON MONDAY 12TH OCTOBER 2015.

Let me start by thanking Afolabi Imokhuede, and by extension, Skillup Tvet Limited for the honour of inviting me to be the commencement speaker ~~at~~ this graduation ceremony.

I feel highly honoured and humbled to be considered by Afolabi, who I find most affable, humble and passionate.

His passion clearly underlines the path that he has chosen, a path that creates solutions to our problems rather than being one of the many voices of lamentation who offer no solutions.

Afolabi and many like him, who have chosen to act rather than agonize, represent the Nigerian spirit that I have known and I have urged.

It is a spirit of endurance, it is a spirit that refuses to be dominated, it is a spirit that does not surrender and it is a spirit that ultimately refuses to accept impossibility.

What Skillup Tvet Limited has set about, which is to champion the development of young people into competent enterprise builders and wealth creators, through technical skills competency is not new.

It was always part of the culture of the Nigeria in which I grew up especially during the late 1960s to the early 1970s.

They operated as apprentices under master mechanics, master traders, master carpenters, master bakers, master plumbers and often masters and madams of different trades.

Parents paid for their children or wards to be attached to these professionals under an apprenticeship programme that to the best of my knowledge, had no defined tenure.

There were no formal classrooms.

The apprentice learned in the mechanic yard, in the sewing room, on the building site or wherever the vocation was carried out.

As far as I recall, there was no written curriculum, only the master knew what you had to learn and when you are good enough.

My recollection was that the apprentice started out life by helping to run errands, bringing tools, washing up and performing chores withing the work place; and how reliable he proved to be, was an index of whether he would be entrusted with the next task of trying his hands out.

Often times mistakes were violently punished. Corporal punishments were an integral part of skill and technical education in the informal sector and it formed a huge proportion of the training of artisans, even though there were a few technical colleges and schools affiliated to global agencies like City and Guilds.

There was no commencement speaker on graduation day.

Graduation I recall was called Freedom Day.

That was the day the apprentice was free of the master. The day he was free of corporal punishment. The day he became his own man.

It was a big event.

It was the day the apprentice will get the blessing of his master to get out in the world and practice his trade. It was a big issue. The master must pray for his protégé.

Some were gracious enough to also pay for the first set of tools to start up the apprentice, otherwise it was the parents who paid for the tools.

These were the men and women who built our Nation, and our early stadia, our roads, our houses, our old schools, from the North, to the South. There was a quality to their finish.

They did not cut corners. They were a proud generation of tradesmen and craftsmen. They passed their trade from generation to generation until we almost killed them.

Yes, we almost killed them. We undervalued their contribution; we denigrated them because they did not wear suits and ties; we did not reward them; and we did not build our economy to incorporate their skills, which would perhaps today have led us to industrialization and inventions.

What we threw away, were the strategic cornerstones of the economies of Asia in the early 1970s and none of you must be surprised that your clothing, your phones, and many other appliances you use today are either made in Malaysia, Vietnam, India and of course China.

This is how China became the second largest economy in the World by productivity, based on a national policy that harnessed the technical and entrepreneurial skills of its large and young population about three decades ago.

I have chosen this historical perspective to highlight and bring to focus to you all the importance of the training that you have received here.

I have also done so, to enable us all appreciate what one man, like Afolabi can achieve without waiting for government.

Most importantly, I have done so to highlight the role that Government must play, which is simple, to build an economy that thrives on productive activity based on the skill and entrepreneurial ability of young people who are ready to work.

Government and all of us must move our economy and our culture away from rent and begging.

We must emphasize the truism that whoever is physically able to work and does not do so, is not entitled to eat.

We must elevate the status of those who built our Nation by getting their hands dirty.

We must valorize and dignify the producers of our food, the hewers of our wood, the drawers of our water, the drillers of our oil, the bakers of our bread, those who cover our nakedness by sewing our clothes and the men and women who do what we ignorantly still call menial work.

Indeed their work is not menial. It is productive, it is the sum total of our wealth, our National GDP, and the defining line in our National balance sheet.

The more they produce, the less we import.

The more they produce, the richer we will be.

The more they produce, the more self dependent we will be.

The more they produce, the more secure our Nation will be.

The more they produce the greater will our global strength be; then we will have achieved the most important milestone to our prosperity because, more brands and products will carry those important words "Made in Nigeria" not "made in China".

Ladies and gentlemen, Afolabi and Skillup Tvet Limited, are the new master bakers, master mechanics, master plumbers, master tailor that represent the new Nigeria.

What they are doing is not re-invention of the wheel. Rather they are making an old wheel of Nation building better and stronger. They are replacing an informal curriculum used by the old masters with a formal one.

They are replacing old learning workshops with a better one.

They have thrown corporal training away and replaced it with supported and assisted training.

They are resuscitating a vital but hitherto unappreciated capacity of nation-building and investing it with its appropriate and deserving respect and dignity.

They are teaching all of us that you are indeed the builders of our new Nigeria.

They are telling all of us that there will be no great Nation without your input, and that you are the ones who have the moral authority to confidently ask the rest of us, "what have we done for our Nation"?, because you feed us, repair our cars, you produce our furniture, you cloth us and do so many more.

I congratulate you all on this occasion and wish you all the best in your various undertakings.

On your behalf, I thank Skillup Tvet Limited and all their partners who have invested in this training programme.

I also use this opportunity to accept the invitation to chair one of the Skillup Innovation Centres to which Afolabi has invited me, and I pledge to devote as much time and energy as my current engagements permit me.

I conclude by urging you today, to remember, that you are not inferior to anybody, and that those who produce nothing, cannot question your contribution to Nation building.

God bless you all.

Thank you for listening.

Babatunde Raji Fashola, SAN

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