

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA
PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBASANJO OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF
NIGERIA—BRINGING POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

“Daddy, do not become head of state,” implored his nine-year-old daughter Iyabo. His becoming the nation’s leader was what everyone else in the family dreaded most. They had not dared broach the subject.

Silence fell over the room. Everyone waited anxiously to hear how her father, Olusegun Obasanjo, would reply.

In February of 1976, becoming Nigeria’s leader was life-threatening. The reigning head of state, General Murtala Ramat Muhammed, had been assassinated just as he had been trying to lead the nation from military to civilian rule. General Obasanjo was the second in command. It was highly probable that the next leader would meet the same fate as his predecessor.

“You have my word, Iyabo,” he finally said. “I will resign at the end of the Supreme Military Council meeting tomorrow and we will go to Abeokuta and live a quiet life.”

He had decided to do just that, having begun preparations for the return home. But he did not know what the next few days might have in store for him. He hugged each of his five children, one by one. It was his parting gift to them, just in case something terrible should happen.

Mr. Obasanjo was thirty-eight. His decision to turn down the position of head of state was not made out of fear, but because he was utterly disgusted with the present state of his country. “Nigeria is no longer worth serving if General Muhammed could be so cruelly rewarded for his selfless service to the nation,” he insisted to the council members.

While still under colonial rule, most African nations regarded “independence” as a magic word. With independence, their centuries of suffering and strife would all come to an end; if only they had independence, everything would be all right, they thought. But this, they were soon to learn, was an illusion.

Even after independence, they continued to be dominated, though in a different form, by foreign nations. A small, privileged class allied themselves with the exploiters and lined their own pockets in the process.

Reformist groups carried out one coup d’état after another, but each new government quickly became tainted by the very corruption they opposed. Countries involved in the Cold War exploited the many civil wars by selling weapons to both sides.

After gaining its independence from Great Britain in 1960, Nigeria fell victim to the terrible tragedy of civil war, and happiness for its people seemed far away.

At the council meeting, it was pointed out to General Obasanjo that if he didn’t accept the office of head of state, it would fall into the hands of the rebels.

He no longer had any choice. Perhaps this is my duty and destiny, he thought. When his little daughter learned that her father could not keep his promise, she wept inconsolably.

I first met Mr. Obasanjo sixteen years later, in the spring of 1992. He was with the Nigerian Ambassador to Japan, Mai-Bukar Garba Dogon-Yaro. He had come to Tokyo as an African representative to an environmental conference.

Mr. Obasanjo served as head of state for three years—from 1976 to 1979. As he had pledged, he brought an end to the military government. He introduced a democratic constitution that enshrined the sovereignty of the people and basic human rights, and

established a presidential system of government. He was the first Nigerian leader to step down to make way for democracy.

On that first visit to Japan, Mr. Obasanjo attended a Soka Gakkai women's division leaders meeting and gave a speech affirming his support of our cultural movement. Culture, he said, is the guiding force in our lives. Without culture, we are rootless. His speech was broadcast by satellite all across Japan.

He identified the spirit of Buddhism as rejecting servility and oppression, saying that Buddhism has the power to elevate humanity.

He showed himself to be a dignified leader with a sharp, quick mind and a warm smile.

A leader, he said, must be clearly focused and have his own goals, or he will be swayed by others and pulled off course.

Mr. Obasanjo's personal focus was education. When he was head of state, he made elementary school education free and built many universities in an effort to make education available to all Nigerian children.

In October of the same year, we welcomed Mr. Obasanjo to Soka University, where student members of the Pan-African Friendship Society gave a choral performance in his honor. They sang the Nigerian song "Abeokuta," which is the name of the town where Mr. Obasanjo grew up.

*That hill, that land—
That is where you were born,
A land of rich blessings and peace.
I am happy, here on the Olumo Rocks.
I will never forget you,
I will keep you always in my heart.*

"Abeokuta" means "under the rocks." The song is based on the legend of the Olumo Rocks that saved lives by concealing people and keeping them safe from warfare.

True leaders must be rocks that protect the people. In our conversation, Mr. Obasanjo and I agreed with the Nigerian saying: "The roof battles the rain, but those who are protected by the roof are unaware they are being protected."

Mr. Obasanjo, son of a prosperous farmer, was born in 1937 in a small village near Abeokuta. He was a very bright student, skipping grades several times. When he was about thirteen, the fortunes of his father's farm suddenly turned and he was forced to pursue his studies under increasingly difficult circumstances.

He would go to the nearby forest to collect firewood, or to the river for sand, which he sold to construction companies. He also worked as a laborer on other people's farms. Faced with these hardships, whenever he began to get discouraged he would recall his elementary school motto, "Help Yourself," and then try even harder. He supported himself by doing odd jobs throughout his high school years.

The school was located in Abeokuta, and occasionally his mother would travel from their village to bring him what little food she could spare.

Mr. Obasanjo got excellent grades and went on to become a teacher, but he remained as poor as ever. He later entered the military, an unlikely course for someone whose high school class described him as "unsoldierly". But, in the military, he could receive a free education.

Later, he went to study at the British Royal College of Military Engineering in England where he won a citation as the best Commonwealth student in the history of the school.

When he entered the military, he did not dare tell his mother that he had adopted this most dangerous of professions; he knew she would faint in shock if she were to find out.

Is it the fate of heroes to be dogged by tragedy, and the sincere, by betrayal?

The road to democracy that Mr. Obasanjo had initiated was blocked by a coup d'état, and military rule was restored. Once again, the nation was wracked by corruption and looting of the public treasury. In the mid-1980s, Nigeria's standard of living dropped below what it had been in the 1950s, prior to independence.

Nigeria has a population of close to 120 million, the largest in Africa. One in five sub-Saharan Africans is a Nigerian. From ancient times, Nigeria has boasted highly developed cultures, such as those of the Nok and Ife, which date back some two millennia. Its music and art have also had a great influence on that of modern Europe.

Nigeria's beautiful land is rich in oil resources and wonderful people. Yet, why has there been so much suffering and poverty?

Corruption. "Corruption is a greater threat to African development than AIDS," says Mr. Obasanjo, who continued to promote democracy even after his retirement from politics. He has lived true to his belief in a life of service to humanity.

He has promoted Nigeria on the world stage. He established the African Leadership Forum and Foundation, worked for UNESCO, and mediated tirelessly in peace talks between Angola and Namibia. He has even been proposed as a candidate for secretary-general of the United Nations.

In 1986, as co-chair of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group on South Africa, he went to South Africa and visited Nelson Mandela in prison. During that visit, Mr. Obasanjo is well known for entering a "Whites Only" beach in protest of Apartheid, showing the world the absurdity of this policy. Later, Mr. Mandela praised Mr. Obasanjo as "a special friend who stands head and shoulders far above many who occupy high positions."

The Nigerian leader has many friends around the world and he has continually fought to prevent Nigeria from being isolated from the international community.

But how did the political leaders of his own country repay his efforts? With prison.

In 1995, the government arrested this man who had spoken continuously for democracy. He was sentenced to death. Vigorous outcries from around the world led to the sentence being reduced to fifteen years, and he was imprisoned in Yola Prison, which was known as a hell on Earth.

He remained in prison for more than three years. Finally, with the death of the dictator, he was released. But what he found outside was a nation torn apart and nearly destroyed by corrupt and greedy leaders.

Mr. Obasanjo decided to stand up once again for the sake of his beloved Nigeria. His slogan in the presidential election was "Power to the People." And in February 1999, he was elected president.

He would be the valiant individual who would lead his homeland into the twenty-first century. When he came to visit Japan two months after his election, I welcomed him with deep emotion. He opened his arms wide and was just as happy to see me.

I lauded his invincible conviction. Though his physical health suffered as a result of his time in prison, his spirit never wavered. He never despaired. He believed in God and knew the day would come when he would be freed. He never considered giving up his struggle to serve humanity. A friend wrote him while in prison, saying "you seem to have something that we outside the prison do not have." Mr. Obasanjo's every word was filled with strong faith and commitment to life.

What is democracy?

There are leaders who do not abandon their political convictions, even when they are imprisoned for them. Yet, there are also political leaders who care only for immediate gain and change their beliefs as easily as their clothes. In their quest for power, they have no compunction in trampling on truth and justice, and equally little compunction in trampling on the people. How dare such leaders talk about democracy?

Without people willing to risk their lives for their beliefs, democracy becomes lifeless. However fine a constitution or political system a nation may have, without a democratic spirit, it will be only an empty form. A body without breath is dead.

Mr. Obasanjo says that he wants to give the people of his country self-confidence. He wants to restore their faith in themselves, their government, and their country. The fervor with which he said these words almost brought tears to my eyes. I saw much in Mr. Obasanjo's humility and his love for the people that the Japanese can learn from.

How much more noble it is to clutch hope firmly to one's heart, to always look to the future, no matter how often one is trampled down than it is to let a brief period of prosperity go to one's head and convince one that the spiritual realm of life is unimportant and irrelevant!

The Japanese have a deplorable tendency to look down on what we call the Third World. Judging a nation solely on its wealth is nothing if not evidence of being uncultured and uncivilized. Today, Japan is paying the price for its hypocritical lip service to the importance of the spirit.

From ancient times, the cultures of Africa have had a deep respect and awe for the wondrous life force permeating nature, human society and all things in the universe. Today's materialistic culture has reached a dead end, and Africa holds the key to the transformation to a culture of life.

The future — a glorious future — awaits Africa.

Mr. Obasanjo and I talked about the future. I spoke of my hopes for a United States of Africa; the new Nigerian president spoke of his hopes for educational exchange.

A Nigerian proverb says, "Hope is the pillar that holds up the world."

I presented President Obasanjo with a poem I had written for him, titled "Rising Sun of Africa — Paean to Democracy." The poem begins:

The sun is never defeated!
—*"Nothing can obscure me,*
No matter how deep the darkness!"

The sun never retreats!
—*"The path of my mission is unchanging,*
No matter how storms may rage!"

The sun never rests!
—*"I will shine as long as there are people who seek my light,*
No matter how heavy the clouds of exhaustion!"

This poem is also a paean to Africa, "great continent of the sun," and a tribute to Nigeria, a developed nation in the struggle for human rights, that has broken through the darkness, holding high the light of hope and illuminating all.