

IDOMA CENTENARY PLUS CELEBRATION 2026

Centenary Lecture

**THE POLITICAL CHOICES OF
THE IDOMA PEOPLE SINCE 1950:
CONTEXT, CONSEQUENCES,
AND THE PATH FORWARD**

A Keynote Address

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PREAMBLE: WHY THIS CONVERSATION MATTERS

I stand before you this morning not merely as a lawyer or a former public officeholder, but as an Idoma man who has spent the better part of four decades watching and participating in the political choices that have shaped the destiny of our people. I have been privileged to serve at the local government level, to sit in the Executive Council of Benue State, and to practise law at the highest levels of our courts. These experiences have afforded me a vantage point from which I can speak with some measure of candour about where we have been, where we are, and where we must resolve to go.

This address is not an exercise in academic abstraction. It is a frank conversation among kinsmen and kinswomen at a moment of immense historical significance, the centenary of our modern political consciousness. The Idoma Centenary Plus Celebration invites us to do more than honour the past; it compels us to interrogate it, to weigh the ledger of our political choices with the rigour of an advocate and the honesty of a patriot.

Let me state at the outset that I intend to be charitable but not sentimental, respectful of our fathers but not uncritical of their methods, and hopeful for our children without pretending that hope alone can bridge the gap between where we stand and where we deserve to be.

PART I: THE FOUNDATIONS — LATE COLONIALISM AND THE FIRST GENERATION OF IDOMA POLITICAL ELITES (1950–1966)

The Crucible: Colonial Humiliation and the Birth of Ethnic Consciousness

To understand the political choices of the Idoma people, one must first appreciate the crucible in which those choices were forged. Long before the question of which party to join arose, the Idoma had already been subjected to a systematic assault on their collective dignity under British colonial rule. The British policy of Indirect Rule, as implemented in the then Northern Region, imposed Hausa-Fulani administrative structures upon peoples who had never been conquered by the Sokoto Caliphate. The Idoma, who had historically governed themselves through decentralised assemblies, the **Ojila system** guided by the *Alekwu* ancestral moral system, found themselves subjected to alien Alkali courts, Hausa tax scribes, and district officers drawn from the emirate tradition. As **Professor Moses Ochon** has documented in his seminal study of the **Idoma Hope Rising Union**, the humiliation of colonial taxation had a particularly devastating dimension: defaulting male taxpayers were publicly flogged in front of their wives and children, their domestic animals seized, and their female family members detained, a calculated assault on the very core of Idoma notions of masculine honour and communal dignity.

The economic oppression was equally severe. When locusts ravaged crops across Northern Nigeria in the mid-1930s, the colonial authorities perversely raised the tax by two shillings. Unable to pay, some Idoma men took their own lives. Thousands migrated southward to the cocoa fields of the Southwest the so-called Kurmi migration in search of the cash with which to meet colonial tax obligations. The pawning of children became widespread. These were not

abstract historical events; they were the lived experiences of our grandfathers and great-grandmothers, and they created the emotional reservoir from which Idoma political consciousness would draw for generations.

It was in this climate of oppression, humiliation, and economic dislocation that the first Idoma ethnic association **the Idoma Loving Union** was formed on the **1st of April, 1936, in Lagos**. Ironically, it was the Igbo community's example of ethnic solidarity that inspired the founding members. As one pioneer recalled, "it was the Igbo sense of togetherness that encouraged some of us to form the Idoma Loving Union." The Union was established to "**rid Idoma land of self-greed, and to emblazon the name of Idoma on the face of the British Empire**." By 1944, this had evolved into the **Idoma Hope Rising Union (IHRU)**, founded by a remarkable group of Western-educated young men among them **P.U. Onazi, Thomas George, O.A. Onazi, S.A. Ifere, Alfred Abah, Odumu Ocheibi, Edwin Ogbu, Ogbu Ogbole, Victor Ameh, Edwin George, Oga Okwoche, Agbo Onazi, Adakole Ameh, James Oche, Abu Eigege, Ebiaga Okpabi, Eje Eyanya, S.I. Ameh, and Onukpa Omikpa**. These were mission-school products, many of whom had attended **Methodist College Uzuakoli** in Igboland, and their exposure to wider currents of nationalistic thought gave them both the vocabulary and the ambition to demand a new deal for the Idoma people.

The First Great Political Choice: NPC or UMBC?

As Nigeria moved toward self-government and the regional elections of 1951, 1954, and 1959 approached, the first generation of Idoma political elites faced a decision whose consequences reverberate to this day: should the Idoma align with the radical minority movements of the Middle Belt, particularly the **United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC)** led by the great **J.S. Tarka**, or should they cast their lot with the conservative, ruling **Northern People's Congress (NPC)** of the **Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello**?

To place this choice in context, it is essential to understand what the Middle Belt movement represented. As **James Pam** has documented, the Middle Belt consciousness arose from the shared experience of non-Muslim, non-Hausa/Fulani peoples who had been subjected to emirate rule under Indirect Rule. The UMBC was a fusion of the Middle Zone League and the Middle Belt People's Party, formed in 1956 to provide a political platform for these diverse ethnic nationalities. Its leaders such as **Tarka, Akase Dowgo, David Lot, Patrick Dokotri, Isaac Shaahu, Solomon Lar**, among others articulated a vision of regional autonomy and minority self-determination that resonated deeply with the experiences of oppression that the Idoma shared with other Middle Belt peoples.

And yet, under the leadership of **Och'Idoma Ogiri Okoh** and prominent political figures such as **Chief J.C. Obande** and **Chief Abutu Obekpa**, the Idoma chose to align with the NPC. This was not an irrational decision. It was a calculated act of political pragmatism. The Idoma leadership argued that as a geographically isolated minority within the Northern Region, aligning with the ruling party would provide greater protection and development

resources than confrontational minority politics. The Idoma were not geographically contiguous with the main body of Middle Belt peoples; they were situated at the far southeastern corner of the Northern Region, separated from the Plateau-centred UMBC heartland by the vast Tiv country. Alignment with the UMBC would have placed them in double jeopardy. A minority within a minority coalition that was itself in opposition.

This strategy yielded immediate dividends. The NPC alliance secured federal and regional investments that supported the growth of Otukpo as an administrative and commercial hub. Idoma sons were appointed to federal and regional positions. In a political environment where the ruling party controlled the allocation of development resources, proximity to power translated into tangible benefits. But the costs were equally real, if less immediately visible. By choosing the NPC over the UMBC, the Idoma effectively broke ranks with the broader Middle Belt solidarity movement. They forfeited the moral authority that comes from standing with fellow minorities against a common oppressor. They established a pattern; alignment with the centre at the expense of regional solidarity that would repeat itself through subsequent political eras, sometimes with diminishing returns.

The consequences of this pattern were illuminated when, on the **6th of May, 1956**, **Mallam Ibrahim Imam** moved the historic motion for the creation of a Middle Belt Region on the floor of the Northern House of Assembly. That motion was defeated by 68 votes to 2, with 5 abstentions. Tragically, all Middle Belt representatives from Benue Province including the Idoma members voted against the motion. Only **Moses Nyam Rwang** supported **Ibrahim Imam**. The Idoma, along with other NPC-aligned minorities, helped to kill the very proposal that might have liberated them from permanent minority status within the Northern Region. This is perhaps the first great lesson of our political history: pragmatic alignment with power can secure short-term advantages, but it can also foreclose long-term structural possibilities. The Middle Belt Region that was defeated in 1956 might have fundamentally altered the political geography of Nigeria and the political fortunes of the Idoma. We shall never know, because our fathers helped to vote it down.

The IHRU's Internal Contradictions

Even as the Idoma elite were making their external political choices, the IHRU itself was ridden by internal contradictions that foreshadowed a recurring theme in Idoma politics: the inability of the elite to sustain consensus. **Och'Idoma Ogiri Okoh**, a conservative chief who had been appointed precisely because he could neutralise the young, educated activists, shrewdly outmanoeuvred the IHRU. He co-opted the moderates into the Idoma State Union (ISU), which aligned with the NPC, while the radical wing of the IHRU was marginalised and eventually pushed out of Idomaland entirely.

The radical members migrated to northern cities of Kaduna, Kano, Kafanchan, and Jos where, unable to effect political change at home, they redirected their energies toward moral and cultural policing, most controversially the campaign to repatriate independent Idoma women whom they characterised as prostitutes. This displacement of political frustration into gender

vigilantism is instructive: it demonstrates how the failure to achieve political objectives can distort a movement's agenda, channelling legitimate grievances into regressive and ultimately self-defeating activities. The lesson here is not merely historical. The tendency to substitute internal cultural control for external political achievement to police our own rather than confront the structures that constrain us has recurred in various forms throughout Idoma political history. It is a temptation we must resist.

PART II: THE SECOND GENERATION — INDEPENDENCE, THE CIVIL WAR, AND THE MILITARY ERA (1960–1999)

The First Republic and the Civil War

The transition to independence in October 1960 coincided with the passing of **Och'Idoma Ogiri Okoh** and the selection of **Abraham Ajene Okpabi as Och'Idoma II**. Okpabi's selection was itself a significant political gesture: he was of Iggede descent, and his elevation to the paramount stool demonstrated the Idoma Division's capacity for internal pluralism a capacity that has, regrettably, not always been sustained in subsequent decades. During the First Republic, the Idoma elite continued their strategy of aligning with the ruling national party. **Chief J.C. Obande** and **Chief Abutu Obekpa** served as federal ministers, ensuring that Idoma interests were represented at the centre. But the First Republic was short-lived. The military coup of January 1966, the counter-coup of July 1966, and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967 fundamentally altered the political landscape.

The Civil War had a direct and devastating impact on Idomaland. Situated on the border of the secessionist Republic of Biafra, Otukpo became a key staging post and transit route for the Federal Armed Forces. This frontline position prompted massive enlistment among Idoma youths, creating a professional military class that would shape the community's political trajectory for decades.

The Military Era and the “Idoma Moment”

The military era, stretching from 1966 to 1999, produced what has been aptly described as the “**Idoma Moment**” in national military administration. A highly influential class of Idoma officers occupied key roles in federal governance: **Brigadier Ebije Ikwue** served as **Chief of Air Staff**, **Colonel Anthony Ochefu** was **Provost Marshall** of the Army and later **military Governor** of the South Eastern State, **Brigadier General David Mark** served as **Military Governor** of Niger State and **Minister of Communications**; **Major General Lawrence Onoja** held key military governorships in Plateau and Katsina states; and later as **Principal staff officer** the equivalent of the Presidency in the military administration of General Sani Abacha. **Major General Chris Abutu Garuba** served as **Governor of Bauchi State** and on ruling military councils; **Jomo Adapoyi** was **Director of the Nigerian Prison Service**, and **Dr. Edwin Ogebe Ogbu**, a veteran diplomat who served as **Nigeria's Permanent Representative to the United Nations**, later became

Och'Idoma III.

This concentration of military-bureaucratic power allowed the Idoma elite to protect minority interests and channel resources to their communities in ways that the ballot box alone could not have achieved. A major milestone occurred in February 1976 when they were instrumental in the successful lobbying for the creation of Benue State during **General Murtala Mohammed's** state creation exercise. However, the re-configuration of the state in 1991 (when the Igala were excised to the new Kogi state) also introduced a demographic reality that has defined Idoma politics ever since. The new state was constituted by grouping the Tiv, Idoma, and Igede into a single administrative unit. This structure placed the Idoma (seven local government areas) and the Igede (two local government areas) in a permanent numerical minority within a state where the Tiv controlled fourteen local government areas. The arithmetic was and remains unforgiving.

THE BABANGIDA MILITARY ERA

It is doubtful that our era will witness in our lifetime, a scenario that out of nineteen serving Governors in Nigeria, three of the Governors were from a single tribe (almost akin to Judah in the bible). All the Governors duly earned their positions on their personal merit without doubt. That the three Idoma sons were unable to leverage their positions, number and influence in getting the Idoma state speaks to possibly disunity, individualism, lethargy or lack of foresight. Whatsoever may be the underlying reasons, their actions or inactions will subject them to unsavory historical comments now and hereafter.

It will be unfair to judge or/and characterize the actions of our kinsmen who served during the Babangida days as totally falling short. It is to the credit of David Mark as Minister of Communications that he ensured that Otukpo had among the best telephone systems in the entire country even though it was mostly underutilized. We had digital land lines and the first cellular roll-outs. In addition to his credit, he procured the construction firm of PW a construction company to embark on the construction of drains and township roads within Otukpo metropolis. How the projects fitted into his portfolio or office is still difficult to decipher but they got done. Sadly, change in office led to the project been abandoned.

The Second and Third Republics

In the Second Republic (1979–1983), the Idoma political class repeated their established strategy, aligning with the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which controlled the federal government. This secured significant federal influence, most notably through **Chief Audu Ogbeh's** prominent ministerial appointment, **Chief Morgan Ogbole** as **National Vice Chairman** and **Chief Obande Obeya** as State Chairman of the ruling party. In party leadership, **Stephen Lawani** served as **Deputy National Chairman** of the **National Republican Convention** during the aborted Third Republic. The Third Republic's most notable achievement for the Idoma was the election of **Senator Ameh Ebute** as **President of the Nigerian Senate in 1993**, the first time an Idoma person occupied the nation's third-highest political office. This was a remarkable accomplishment for a minority ethnic group,

and it demonstrated the efficacy of the mainstream alignment strategy at the national level. But a critical observation must be made here. Throughout these decades of military rule and brief civilian interludes, the Idoma were accumulating impressive individual appointments and national influence, but they were not building the local political infrastructure the grassroots party organisation, the cross-ethnic coalitions, the voter mobilisation machinery that would be necessary to compete effectively in democratic, majoritarian politics at the state level. The military era, by its nature, rewarded vertical patron-client relationships and individual connections to power rather than horizontal, mass-based political organisation. When democracy returned in 1999, the Idoma elite found themselves nationally connected but locally vulnerable.

PART III: THE FOURTH REPUBLIC – DEMOCRATIC PROMISE AND THE GUBERNATORIAL GLASS CEILING (1999–PRESENT)

The David Mark Era and the Zenith of Federal Leverage

The return to democratic governance in 1999 found the Idoma political class aligned primarily with the **Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)**, which would hold power at the federal level for sixteen years. The central political figure of this era was **Senator David Mark**, who represented the **Benue South Senatorial District** from 1999 to 2019 and served as President of the Senate from 2007 to 2015; the longest-serving holder of that office in Nigeria's history.

I must acknowledge Senator Mark's tenure with the fairness it deserves. During his years as Senate President, Mark leveraged his position to attract federal infrastructure projects to Benue South: the Loko-Oweto Bridge, connecting Benue directly to Nasarawa State and Abuja; the Otobi Multi-Purpose Water Dam; the establishment of a NOUN study centre in Otukpo. Joy FM radio station was a private initiative of his. These were not trivial achievements. For a minority community operating within the constraints of Nigerian federalism, the ability to direct federal resources to one's constituency is a measure of genuine political effectiveness. He also facilitated the appointment of two ministers of state for Education and Comrade Abba Moro as Minister of Interior.

However, for someone having the record of the longest serving Senate President in the history of Nigeria for an uninterrupted period of eight years from **June 5 2007 to June 9 2015** and as a senator for twenty years and recognized as the number three in the country's leadership hierarchy, I leave it to our individual conscience to interpret whether the tenure of that office was commensurate to the legitimate expectation of the people of zone C and other reasonable person.

The Glass Ceiling: Why No Idoma Governor Since 1976

And yet, for all these personal achievements at the national level, the most glaring deficit in Idoma political history remains: since the creation of Benue State in 1976, no Idoma person

has ever been elected Governor. Fifty years of statehood, and the second-largest ethnic group in the state has never occupied Government House in Makurdi. This is the glass ceiling that defines contemporary Idoma politics.

The arithmetic is straightforward and merciless. Benue State's 23 local government areas are divided into three senatorial zones: Zone A and Zone B, comprising 14 LGAs with predominantly Tiv populations, and Zone C, comprising 9 LGAs with Idoma and Iggede populations. Under a strictly majoritarian voting system, the Tiv majority can and consistently does retain executive control. The Idoma, even with near-total unity, cannot produce a Governor without significant cross-ethnic support from Tiv voters.

This structural reality exposes the fundamental limitation of the mainstream alignment strategy that has served the Idoma well at the national level. A federal appointment requires one powerful patron; a state Governorship requires hundreds of thousands of votes across ethnic lines. The skills and relationships that secured federal ministerial positions and Senate presidencies are necessary but wholly insufficient for winning gubernatorial elections.

Let me be direct about a painful truth. The inability of the Idoma elite to break the gubernatorial glass ceiling is not solely attributable to Tiv demographic dominance. It is equally attributable to our own internal fragmentation. Time and again, when the opportunity for an Idoma governorship has appeared on the horizon, the elite have fractured splitting along personal rivalries, generational fault lines, and competing ambitions. Instead of presenting a united front with a single, consensus candidate, we have often fielded multiple aspirants who divided the Idoma vote, made conflicting alliances with Tiv political factions, and ultimately neutralised one another.

This is not a new phenomenon. Recall that the IHRU itself split in 1948 over the relationship with **Och'Idoma Ogiri Okoh**, and split again in 1957 over the repatriation of women controversy. The pattern of initial unity followed by factional rupture has been a recurring feature of Idoma political organisation. **We are, it seems, better at articulating collective grievances than at maintaining the discipline required to translate those grievances into collective political action.**

The Cries of Marginalisation: Internal and External

The frustrations arising from this gubernatorial exclusion have produced two distinct but related discourses of marginalisation.

External Marginalisation

The claim of external marginalisation runs as follows: the Tiv majority, through its control of the state executive and the arithmetic of local government allocation, has systematically excluded the Idoma from the governorship and from equitable access to state resources. This claim has empirical support. The deliberate structuring of local government areas under successive military governments giving the Tiv-dominated zones 14 LGAs against Zone C's 9 was not accidental. As the Middle Belt movement's documentation shows, the North-Central Zone received systematically fewer local government areas, federal constituencies, and

consequently smaller shares of federal subventions, a pattern replicated within states like Benue. The **Benue Rebirth Movement**, led by **retired Air Vice Marshal Monday Morgan**, has articulated this external marginalisation thesis forcefully, demanding that major political parties zone their gubernatorial tickets to Zone C as a matter of equity and justice. Power sadly is not given, it is acquired. In the ongoing party primaries, almost all the Gubernatorial tickets have been acquired by Tiv candidates.

Internal Marginalisation

But there is a second, more uncomfortable dimension of marginalisation that we must confront with equal honesty: internal marginalisation, the marginalisation of ordinary Idoma citizens by their own elite. I have already noted the gap between elite achievements and grassroots realities. While Idoma sons and daughters have occupied some of the most prestigious offices in Nigeria, much of rural Idomaland continues to struggle with poor road networks, inadequate healthcare facilities, a lack of agricultural processing infrastructure, and most devastatingly, escalating security challenges. Farming communities across Idomaland, most notably in Entekpa ward and Umogidi within Otukpo and Apa and Agatu Local Government Areas, have suffered violent attacks that have displaced thousands and disrupted rural economies. The truth that we must confront is this: national political prominence, however impressive, is not a substitute for local development. A Senate Presidency that does not translate into security for farmers in Ado, Ohimini, and Agatu is, at best, an incomplete achievement. Federal infrastructure projects, however welcome, do not replace the systematic investment in local agricultural value chains, rural education, and community policing that can only come from state-level executive power or from an elite that is genuinely invested in the welfare of its people.

This internal marginalisation is compounded by the relational nature of minority status within Zone C itself. While the Idoma contest their minority status relative to the Tiv, the Igede have frequently argued that Idoma political leaders monopolise Zone C's representation, prompting the Igede to reconstruct their political identity as distinct and autonomous. If we demand equity from the Tiv, we must also offer equity to the Igede and other sub-groups within our zone. The credibility of our external claims depends on the integrity of our internal practices.

We must resolve our internal marginalization issues by been fair truthful and strategic. For example, what positions should be the subject of equitable sharing and how? My take is that for sharing purposes, Zone C cannot be pigeon holed into Idoma and Igede. That will be contrary to the time hallowed arrangements using the recognised districts. Enone, Apa/Agatu, Otukpo/Ohimini and the Igede districts. The positions sharable typically are; Ochi'doma, Deputy Governor, political appointments at state and federal levels. These should be put in a basket and shared equitably and fairly.

PART IV: THE ALIGNMENT QUESTION IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS (2015–2026)

The most consequential political development in contemporary Idoma politics is the ongoing debate over political alignment a debate that has intensified since the APC's ascendancy at the federal level in 2015 and has reached a new phase with **former Senate President David Mark's** assumption of the **interim National Chairmanship of the African Democratic Congress (ADC)** in **2025**. This development has divided Idoma political opinion along lines that echo the NPC-versus-UMBC debate of the 1950s. On one side are those who argue, like former federal lawmaker **Francis Ottah Agbo**, that the Idoma can only thrive by aligning with national mainstream parties, citing the historic successes of **J.C. Obande**, **Ogiri Okoh**, and **David Mark** himself as proof. On the other side are those who argue that the mainstream alignment strategy has reached its limits that it has secured national appointments but failed to deliver the state-level executive power that is the key to sustainable local development. Senator Mark's move to the ADC represents an attempt to bridge these two positions. To build a national opposition platform that can simultaneously serve as a vehicle for minority aspirations at the state level. The coalition talks involving prominent figures suggest an ambition that transcends local ethnic politics. We must not forget or overlook the fact that the NDC may take advantage of the challenges the ADC and PDP are facing to emerge as the actual opposition to the ruling party when the dust settles. Are we represented in this scenario if things unfold this way?

I will not presume to judge the wisdom or folly of this realignment from this podium; the returns are not yet in, and history will render its own verdict. But I will observe that the debate itself is healthy and necessary. For too long, the Idoma political class has treated alignment as a settled question rather than a strategic calculation that must be continuously reassessed in light of changing circumstances. The willingness to question inherited assumptions even assumptions that have served us well in the past is a sign of political maturity, not disloyalty. Yet, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, political marginalization is not sustained merely by external structures or unfavourable arithmetic. In many respects, the internal culture of our politics has itself contributed to the developmental stagnation we now lament. The nature of electoral competition, the unrealistic expectations imposed upon political aspirants, and the distortion of representative governance through patronage politics have collectively weakened the capacity of even well-intentioned leaders to govern effectively. It is therefore necessary to confront, with honesty and maturity, certain troubling tendencies within our own political culture.

POLITICAL OFFICE HOLDERS, THE ELECTORATES AND MATTERS ARISING

Seeking elective office in Nigeria and, for purposes of this discussion, in Idoma land is one of the most challenging, financially demanding, mentally exhausting, and potentially damaging activities one can embark upon. The demands; financial and other related ones brought to bear upon aspirants, are so humongous and unrealistic that aspirants are forced to liquidate lifelong hard-earned savings and, in many cases, embark on fire sale of real and personal

assets in order to stand any chance of emerging either in the primary or the substantive election. In fact, it is so ridiculous that it is no longer strange to see a voter ordinarily entitled to cast a single vote in an election demanding that an aspirant seeking election buy a motor car for him in order to secure his vote. Such and similar outlandish and unforeseen demands have ensured that potentially great candidates have shown disinterest or refused to participate in such enterprises, leaving our community worse off in terms of participation/representation at both the local, state and federal levels and consequentially impacting on our short-, medium-, and long-term development. Even when political office holders manage to navigate these treacherous foundational areas, those who manage to get elected become overwhelmed by personal demands; the payment of personal hospital bills, maternity bills, of rent, supporting unrealistic social lifestyles and other such mundane matters that have no relevance to the larger community needs or aspirations.

Political office holders become hostages of these characters who threaten them with defeat in the next election cycle. Whatever resources that typically ought to service developmental projects in our communities are now frittered away to satisfy the whims and caprices of these political jobbers.

To give further context to the above, we find ourselves in a situation where elected representatives, who have the traditional constituency allowance provision in budgets to bring development associated with their positions as elected representatives, now engage, at times, though not always, in actions that are counter-productive, a drain on scarce resources, and what can be aptly described as gorilla economics in the appropriation of constituency projects. It is now the norm that constituency projects are nothing more than the sharing of motorcycles, grinding machines, sewing machines, keke Marwa, and second-hand motor vehicles already on life support amongst others. Most of these items are given to party henchmen, lackeys, foot soldiers, sympathizers, nominees of influential traditional or religious leaders, etc., and have no relevance or bearing whatsoever to the immediate needs of the constituencies that are served. It is not unusual or a surprise, therefore, to find that the recipients of this largesse, within the shortest period of receipt of same, sell them at a massive discount and use the proceeds from such sales to satisfy their personal social cravings. Where elected representatives owe their positions to the ransom paid to the electorates, they owe no duty or responsibility to the community having paid the price. The position confirms the saying: "a people get the leaders they deserve".

In order to ensure that constituency projects have meaning to the constituencies, elected leaders should strive to hold town hall meetings with their people to isolate and articulate the genuine needs and priorities of the communities so that appropriate projects are identified and executed in line with the aspirations of the majority rather than making presumptions on their behalf.

THE TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS, POLITICS AND INTEGRITY

The traditional institutions in a democracy are expected to play the supportive role of giving

appropriate representation and expression of the desires of the people to the political class, albeit in an unseen and unheard manner reminiscent of the British monarchy, where they influence and impact policies and actions of those in government without it being seen to be obvious.

The respect ascribed to the institution will be undermined if the institutions shed the toga of impartiality in political matters. Some traditional rulers in Idoma land, as in so many other parts of the country, are either openly associated with political parties or try to do so discreetly, even if unsuccessfully, mimicking the proverbial ostrich and bringing themselves to disrepute. Outside the instrument of government responsible for providing and guaranteeing security, people look up to the traditional institutions as an alternative or reliable source of guaranteeing or galvanizing efforts to secure their environment where the government fails or falls short.

Traditional institutions must remember that in a multi-party society such as ours, the citizens hold diverse political views or opinions and belong to various and different political platforms or parties. A traditional ruler that therefore becomes politically compromised by showing sympathy or preference for any of the platforms must not expect or demand the loyalty and respect of citizens who not only hold a different political opinion or persuasion but belong to a platform completely at odds with such traditional ruler. The reason for this position is obvious: a traditional ruler with a political bias cannot conceivably be an impartial arbiter, and any decision he is involved in taking in land, chieftaincy issues, personal disputes, commercial disputes, etc., may be viewed through the prism of being influenced or tainted by his political persuasion or disposition. The implication of this on the institution is obvious—it loses credibility, respect, acceptability, and it is incapable of providing the desired leadership that the land requires.

This discussion is important because of the security challenges we currently face, especially the menace of the Fulani herders and terrorists who are hell-bent on creating a security quagmire in our land as a precursor to completely and physically taking over the land and running it as a conquered territory, installing and determining our political future like the modern-day Ilorin and its adjoining areas. A weak traditional institution contaminated by politics cannot provide the necessary security architecture and leadership that will ensure and resist this well-planned onslaught by the Fulani's supported by internal collaborators and unscrupulous security agents of the Nigerian state. Herein lies why our traditional rulers who are either openly or discreetly involved in political activities, must retrace their steps without further delay.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT

Having regard to our minority status in Benue State and the obvious display of nonchalance, disinterest, apathy, and conscious decision not to prioritise development in our zone by the past and present democratically elected chief executives of Benue State, the only assurance for the possible development of our zone comprising the nine local governments will be our

deliberate, painstaking planning and strategic execution of developmental plans driven by the various local governments comprised in our zone.

The provision of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria granting autonomy to the 774 local government councils and very recently given judicial affirmation by the apex court in Nigeria is a welcome development that puts to rest the past excuse by chief executives of such local government councils as to the hijacking of council funds by Governors to which they are entitled from the center. I am not unaware that some local government council executives are participes criminis with their respective Governors, assisting their Governors in the diversion and misappropriation of such funds. I can only say to such council chairmen who engage in this despicable act that they are not immune from prosecution; now or in the future.

The criminal offences of financial and economic crimes arising from such behaviours are neither time nor statute-barred. A Governor's reprieve period for participating in such enterprise inures only while he serves in the capacity of Governor and lapses as soon as he leaves office and becomes liable to prosecution. Chairmen who make themselves Co-conspirators and accessory before and/or after these economic and financial crimes will have themselves to blame!

It is against this background that the conversation about the future direction of Idoma politics must now be situated.

PART V: THE PATH FORWARD — DELIBERATE STRATEGIES FOR POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I have spent the better part of this address examining where we have been. Permit me now to turn to where we must go. I offer these prescriptions not as a politician seeking office, but as a senior statesman and a father who is deeply invested in the future of his people.

1. Build Elite Consensus Before Elections, Not During Them

The single most important thing the Idoma political class can do is to institutionalise a mechanism for pre-election consensus. Every electoral cycle, we repeat the same destructive pattern: multiple aspirants emerge, each with his own support base; negotiations fail; the primary or the election itself becomes a free-for-all; and the community's voting power is dissipated. I propose the establishment of a permanent, non-partisan **Idoma Political Consultative Forum**, a body of respected traditional rulers, religious leaders, elder statesmen, legal practitioners, successful business persons, and civil society leaders whose sole mandate is to facilitate consensus on strategic elections. This body should not dictate candidates, but it should create a structured process for negotiation, evaluation, and endorsement that begins at least two years before each election cycle. Members of this body must be without blemish, impartial, apolitical, patriotic and ready to disclose any conflict of

interests, stepping aside when occasion demands etc. The process must be transparent, its criteria published, and its decisions broadly legitimate. The key word is “institutionalise.” We cannot continue to rely on ad hoc meetings, last-minute phone calls, and the intervention of powerful individuals. We need a standing mechanism that outlives any single personality.

2. Invest Massively in Voter Education and Civic Engagement

Let me speak as a lawyer on this point. The right to vote is meaningless without the knowledge and discipline to exercise it strategically. Our people must understand not merely how to cast a ballot, but how elections are structured, how votes are counted, how the political arithmetic of Benue State works, and why it matters that Zone C votes cohesively rather than in scattered fragments.

I recommend the creation of a **Voter Education and Protection Initiative**, funded by the Idoma diaspora and local philanthropists, with the following components: civic education campaigns in all nine local government areas, conducted in the various dialects and focused on practical political literacy; training of ward-level poll-watching volunteers who can detect and report electoral irregularities; legal aid teams to challenge electoral malpractice through the courts; and a data-driven analysis of voting patterns, turnout rates, and demographic trends across Benue State to inform strategic decision-making. We must stop treating elections as events and begin treating them as processes that require year-round preparation.

3. Build Cross-Ethnic Coalitions on the Basis of Shared Interests

An Idoma Governor of Benue State will not be elected by Idoma votes alone. This is an arithmetic fact, and no amount of agitation can change it. What can change is our approach to coalition-building. Rather than appealing to Tiv voters on the basis of ethnic rotation a legitimate but insufficient argument we must build coalitions on the basis of shared policy interests. The challenges of insecurity, agricultural underdevelopment, inadequate healthcare, and poor infrastructure are not unique to Zone C; they affect Tiv communities in Zones A and B with equal severity. An Idoma candidate who presents a credible, data-driven development blueprint for the entire state not just for Idomaland will command attention and respect across ethnic lines. The Governorship bid by **Chief Mike Onoja** is a confirmation of this possibility. Even though he did not emerge, his support base in the Tiv areas was impressive and an eye opener. I challenge the Idoma intellectual and professional community to produce such a blueprint a comprehensive development plan for Benue State that is so compelling in its analysis and so credible in its costing that it becomes the centrepiece of any Idoma governorship bid. Let the quality of our ideas, not merely the justice of our claim to rotation, be the basis of our appeal.

4. Leverage the Centenary as a Reset Moment

The Idoma Centenary Plus Celebration is more than a cultural festival. It represents a rare psychological window to reset our collective direction. I urge that the Centenary be used to launch two specific initiatives. First, a comprehensive global diaspora database, mapping

every Idoma professional, entrepreneur, and scholar of note across the world. This database should be the foundation of a structured “Alumni Economy”—a network that can be mobilised for development funding, mentorship, and strategic advice. Second, a “People's Charter” a document produced through broad-based consultation that articulates the development priorities of the Idoma people and against which any candidate seeking the community's support can be measured.

5. Cultivate the Third Generation of Leadership

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I am a man of a certain age, and I recognise that the future of Idoma politics does not belong to my generation. The first generation the founders of the IHRU, the men who navigated the treacherous politics of the Northern Region has largely passed. The second generation the military officers, the senators, the national party leaders is in its twilight. The future belongs to a third generation of Idoma leaders: young professionals, tech entrepreneurs, civil servants, and activists under the age of 45 who bring fresh perspectives, new skills, and a healthy impatience with the status quo. But this third generation will not emerge spontaneously. It must be deliberately cultivated. I call on the established Idoma political class to identify, fund, mentor, and prepare younger candidates for the State House of Assembly and the National Assembly. Let us stop recycling the same political class and begin investing in new leadership. And let us not merely invest in those who agree with us; let us invest in those who challenge us, for it is the capacity for internal dissent and renewal that distinguishes a vibrant political community from a stagnant one.

6. Strengthen the Institutional Foundations

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, we must strengthen the institutions—traditional, civic, and cultural that anchor Idoma collective identity. The Och'Idoma institution, Ochetoha K'Idoma, and other community organisations must be supported, respected, and empowered to play their roles as custodians of our collective interest. A people whose institutions are weak cannot sustain the disciplined, long-term political action that their circumstances require. This also means resolving internal governance challenges with maturity and transparency. Disputes over traditional stools, conflicts between generational interests, and disagreements over political strategy are inevitable in any vibrant community. What matters is that they are resolved through legitimate processes rather than through factional warfare that weakens the collective.

CONCLUSION: THE LEDGER AND THE PROMISE

Let me conclude as I began with candour tempered by hope. The political choices of the Idoma people since 1950 have produced a remarkable ledger of achievements. We established a unified traditional institution in the Och'Idoma stool. We produced two Senate Presidents, multiple federal ministers, military governors, diplomats, and national party leaders. We attracted federal infrastructure that connected our homeland to the wider nation. We maintained our cultural identity and our educational tradition through decades of upheaval.

For a minority ethnic group operating within one of the most complex federal systems in the world, this is no small accomplishment. But the ledger also records significant deficits. We have never produced a state governor. We have not translated national political prominence into sustainable local development. We have struggled to maintain elite consensus at critical moments. We have sometimes allowed individual ambition to override collective strategy. And we have not always extended to smaller groups within our zone the equity and inclusion that we demand from the larger state.

The path forward requires us to be honest about both columns of this ledger. It requires us to preserve what has worked our tradition of federal engagement, our investment in education, our cultural cohesion while boldly reforming what has not: our fragmented approach to state-level elections, our over-reliance on individual patrons rather than institutional processes, and our insufficient investment in voter education and grassroots political organisation. As we mark a century of modern Idoma political consciousness, let us resolve that the next century will be defined not by the glass ceilings we failed to break, but by the deliberate, disciplined, and united action through which we broke them.

I thank His Royal Majesty the Och'Idoma, the Board of Trustees, and the organisers of the Centenary Lecture Series for the honour of this invitation. I thank each and every one of you for your patience and attention. May God bless the Idoma nation. May God bless Benue State. May God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Godwin Obla SAN

Otukpo, Benue State, May 2026