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**Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation**

***ReHumanizing Human Experience: A Synopsis of Anyiam-Osigwe’s Treatises***

**Boris Johnson – Former UK Prime Minister**

**Lagos, Nigeria**

**Monday, March 27, 2023**

Emmanuel Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, thank you very, very much indeed. It’s wonderful to be with Your Highnesses, Excellencies. Can you hear me?

**AUDIENCE:** Yes!

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Distinguished guests, members of the Anyiam-Osigwe family and matriarch Dorothy, it’s absolutely wonderful to be here. I’m so excited to be here. I’ve been looking forward to this speech very, very much. Wonderful, very kind of you to invite me. Listening to the speeches already has been so terrific. I don’t know about you; I feel rehumanized already, don’t you?

And it’s so good to be back in Nigeria after an enforced absence. I had to be prime minister for a long time during COVID; I couldn’t get here. Because this is such a wonderful country for us, a wonderful country. You don’t need Google Translate. We all speak the same language. When you arrive – my flight was very late, but it doesn’t matter. When you get here, you don’t have jet lag because the Almighty has brilliantly stationed London and Lagos in the same time zone. You don’t even need an adapter plug for your laptop because Nigeria has had the wisdom to continue to use those classic chunky three-pin British plugs rather than the weedy EU two-point kind.

And here in Lagos you can even drink the local Guinness because this is one of the few cities in the world where you actually brew the inky nectar. Even if I have to admit that Nigerian Guinness seems to be about ten degrees proof and has a kick that would knock them out in the bars of Dublin.

And of course, Lagos is the London of Africa, but it’s also the Dublin of Africa. Why is Lagos the Dublin of Africa, Mr. Deputy Governor? Because they brew Guinness, and because it’s “Dublin” every decade. That joke needs work. It’s doubling in size, that is. You get my point.

And it’s a particular honor to be here at the Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation, and I want to pay tribute to the late Peace Anyiam-Osigwe, who so sadly died in in January. I think Peace was a role model for women in the creative industries, and a role model for female leadership around the world.

In the spirit of this lecture series, I want to talk about human potential and the way we unleash human potential, because that is the prime duty of all of us – all of us, all of the leaders, all of the teachers, politicians everywhere. And I believe that that is the same question, the same puzzle that Emmanuel Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe was revolving.

All my life, I have been meditating on this question of human potential. Who has it? We all have it. But how is it distributed? I began by learning some hard lessons. In my first 18 months of existence, I formed the view that the world revolved around me. And indeed, I probably believed in my infantile narcissism that I had somehow created the world and that everything and everybody were incidental somehow to my pleasure and benefit.

And then, like so many male babies, I experienced a terrible shock. Can you guess what happened? Anybody guess? My sister was born, and I had the first shattering detonation of my egotism and sexism because it turned out that my sister was actually smarter than me. Or at least she was so quick at reading that she briefly overtook me.

And I can remember what happened. We’re driving along, I think, in Somerset in our Renault 4. We come to a sign in the road and my father says, “Kids, what does that sign say?” And I must be more than five, and she’s barely four. And I spell out the letters to myself, “g-i-v-e w-a-y”. And I know that if you have an E at the end, then it lengthens the vowel before the consonant, and I deduce that the sign must be indicating the presence of a give-way, a bit like a driveway. But of course my sister got it right and she said, “Give way. Give way.” Which is what people say to me the whole time in the House of Commons, by the way, give way.

And I gave way to her, and in that searing moment, I abandoned all notions of male intellectual superiority. But – (audio break) – the idea that even if the sexes were intellectually (inaudible), that boys were somehow stronger than girls.

Can you still hear me?

**AUDIENCE:** Yes.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I believed that boys, all boys were stronger than girls, and at the age of about seven, I announced this theory in the playground of a provincial primary school in Camden, in London. “All boys are stronger than girls,” I said, dementedly, like a prepubescent version of Sid the Sexist from *Viz Magazine*.

Thank you for turning me back on there.

And while everyone was laughing at me, a tall girl called Tracy came up. And she must have been only about a year or so older, but she suddenly seemed very big indeed. And I can’t remember exactly how Tracy physically proved I was wrong, but in a flash, I was on my bum on the ground, and I remember looking up and seeing this ring of happy faces laughing, and I felt a total twerp, ladies and gentlemen.

And I’m very grateful to Tracy because she taught me that you shouldn’t be sexist and you shouldn’t generalize about human ability. And of course, I did find, like all of us, I found some things easy, but then other children found other things much easier than I did, and I was hopeless at them. I couldn’t play the recorder and I couldn’t dribble a ball at football.

And I wondered, as we all do, to what extent I had natural aptitudes and skills, and to what extent I was just the product of my parents’ energies and the excellence of my teachers. And I started to form a theory about the world based on my own observation, that there was skill and aptitude and talent, ability everywhere. Yes, pretty much evenly distributed throughout the population. But opportunity was not. There was intelligence everywhere, what you call native wit, but not everybody had the chance to use it or to show it off.

And at the age of about 11 or 12, I found the words to express this idea. It was a poem by Thomas Gray called Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard. You know this one. Gray is standing there at dusk as the curfew tolls the knell of parting day. The lowing herd wind slowly, early and so forth. And he looks at the graves of all these poor, illiterate village folk. And it’s written in about 1750, long before universal education. And it occurs to him that they could have been contenders, these ignorant Buckinghamshire peasants. They could have been poets. They could have been statesmen. They could have been tech billionaires. Not that they had tech billionaires in 1750 Buckinghamshire, but you know what I mean. They just never had the chance, said Gray wistfully, because no one had taught them to read. And he says, “Full many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark, unfathomable caves of ocean bear. Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

And I think he’s right, don’t you? The UK has a population of 66 million. Nigeria may be 200 million, growing. How many of our people are able to reach their full potential, and how many of them are like flowers that nobody ever sees? How many talents are there, like jewels lost in the blackness of an undersea cave?

I’ll tell you how many I think it is. I think it’s a hell of a lot. Millions. Tens of millions. And the job of politicians is to create the conditions in which those people can unleash their potential. Because not only is that morally right, and it’s surely right if we care about human development, to give everyone the chance to express the talents that the Lord has given them. It’s the right way for them to achieve happiness and fulfillment. But it’s also – this is the important part – It’s also the right thing for the economy, because what we’re seeing everywhere, I think in both our countries, is a colossal waste of human potential.

All my political career, whether as mayor of London or as prime minister, it’s been about trying to solve that mystery, unleashing that talent, excavating the gem from the darkened cave, letting people flower.

And the phenomenon we’ve seen in both our countries is that people in search of opportunity have migrated from the countryside to the cities because that is where the jobs are. That’s why London is the most productive city in the whole of Europe, and that’s why Lagos is doubling the whole time.

I’m honored to speak in the in the presence of the deputy governor of Lagos. Dr. Kadri. I hope you won’t mind if I try to outline from the point of view of a former mayor of London what I think are the crucial conditions for allowing talent to bloom and for cities to thrive. The first and most important, it’s got to be safe. You’ve got to have equality under the law because that is the foundation of freedom.

And of course, I know some of the problems that are faced in some parts of this wonderful country. I know the lives that are sadly being lost. But those bandits, I do want to tell you, those bandits, those terrorists can and must and will be defeated, and eventually, law and order will prevail. I want you to know, by the way, that the UK, as ever, stands ready to help.

But we in the UK have certainly had our own problems with terrorists in the past. And I’m proud to say now that London is one of the safest big cities in the world. Indeed, the Metropolitan Police are so impartial that they once arrested Prince Andrew himself, the son of our late Queen, when they saw him loitering in the shrubbery of Buckingham Palace. You laugh. In what later turned out to be a case of mistaken identity.

I thought this was quite funny until a couple of years ago, the Met actually fined me in circumstances that I still find almost too painful to describe, simply for standing at my desk in the cabinet room and eating lunch.

For followers of British politics, I want you to know that the fabled birthday cake, about which the BBC and the rest of the media fulminated for well over a year, remained unseen by me throughout that 20 minutes in its Tupperware box, later to be discovered and consumed by my private secretaries.

And look, whatever you may say about that unhappy episode, look on the bright side. Can you imagine the Moscow police arresting Vladimir Putin for having lunch at his desk for 20 minutes? Can you imagine the Chinese police doing the same thing to Xi Jinping.

Whatever else it shows, that decision, which may seem to me to be bizarre, it shows to me that the law is enforced in my country without fear and without favor, and whoever you are – whoever you are, high or low, rich or poor, you will receive the same scrutiny and the same protection - the same protection in the UK.

And that is the first and most crucial freedom and the precondition for economic growth and investment, freedom under the law, freedom to live your life as you choose within the law, provided you do no harm to others.

The next great freedom, an indispensable freedom, is the right to choose those who govern you and the right to remove them from office. It’s called democracy, and it’s very precious, and it works. And it’s under attack the whole time.

Why did Vladimir Putin decide to launch his evil and criminal onslaught on Ukraine, triggering the worst war in Europe for 80 years? Because he could see that the Ukrainians were choosing a different path. They were going towards an open, liberal democratic system, a different system from the one that he was permitting to the Russian people. And he could see that there was a risk in this for him, and that as Ukraine succeeded and aligned ever more closely with Western democracy, that the Russian people would themselves demand change and that Putin’s own position would be under threat.

And why, by the way, do you think he miscalculated so badly? Why did he fail to foresee the heroic resistance of the Ukrainians? Why did he get it wrong?

By the way, the Ukrainians are going to win, just so you know. I’m very proud of what the UK did when I was prime minister to help them with lethal aid. We were the first major European country to give them serious quantities of lethal weaponry, the shoulder launched anti-tank missiles in particular, and they helped the Ukrainians to kick Putin’s forces out of Kiev or the Kiev region, out of Kharkiv, out of Kherson. And I believe that this year, in 2023, they will be able, if Ukraine’s friends continue to give them what they need, to kick Putin out of the whole country.

But why did he get it wrong? Why did he underestimate the Ukrainians? He’s normally thought of as a brilliant, chess-like calculator, isn’t he, Putin?

I’ll tell you why. He’s made a terrible mistake. He’s incapacitated about 25% of Russian military forces. He’s running seriously low on ammunition.

I’ll tell you why he got it wrong. It’s precisely because he isn’t democratic. It’s because he was surrounded by yes-men and sycophants, and he didn’t have backbenchers, like I do or did. He didn’t have anybody giving him contrary advice. He just had everybody saying, “Yes, yes. Vladimir, go right ahead, Vladimir.” Of course he got it wrong. He had no democratic checks and balances. That’s why, in the words of Winston Churchill, democracy is the worst system in the world except for all the others.

Let me give you another proof of the value of the democratic system that we both operate in Nigeria, in the UK. Who here has been vaccinated against COVID. Who’s been vaccinated? A healthy majority there, I’d say, virtually everybody. I’ve been vaccinated, by the way. Who had Sputnik? Right. Who had Sinovac.

All right, look, I mean no disrespect to anybody who used either of those vaccines, but the vaccines that actually worked, that were effective were made, as it happens, in the liberal, free market democracies. The effective, medically effective vaccines. That was extremely telling because it’s in the liberal, free market democracies that the best scientists actually want to live. And you’re more likely to produce a genuine scientific breakthrough if you’re interested in what shareholders are going to say than if you’re worried about what the Politburo is going to say.

That’s the third crucial condition for releasing human potential. You need a society that is open – (audio break) – on grounds of religion, yes, or race or ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation.

And I can tell you, in London, about 40% of the population is born abroad, including me, by the way. I was born in New York. A very expensive decision, it turned out to be, under the American tax system. I had to give it up. But in London, we speak more languages on the streets of London than virtually any city in the world, obviously, with the exception of Lagos, where I know hundreds of languages are spoken.

That’s why London is such a ferment of creative energy, like Lagos. We have more tech unicorns in the UK than France and Germany and Israel combined. We have one roughly every two weeks, a new tech unicorn being born. We have fintech, medtech, edtech, biotech, nanotech, green tech, Aztec, Toltec, Mixtec. The whole thing sounds like 15th century Mexico.

And I pay tribute to the role of Peace Anyiam-Osigwe in setting up the Oscars of Africa, but we have almost as many films made on the streets of London as in Hollywood itself. In fact, I believe that London, Lagos and Los Angeles are the biggest centers of movie production in the world.

So what are the ingredients? Are you following me? You need freedom under the law, security, democracy, openness and tolerance. But even that is not enough for urban success, given the challenges we face. And to deliver equality of opportunity and to unleash human potential, the state, we, all of us have two more giant tasks.

We have the Commissioner for Transport here. I used to be Chairman of Transport for London. You need to allow talent to move. I mean physically move. You need people to be able to move swiftly and affordably, cheaply from where they live to where they can maximize their talents. Absolutely fundamental. Absolutely fundamental. And it’s one of the many blessings of living in London that in 1853, they came up with the idea of putting trains in drains, they called it, trains in tunnels – 1853, so that suddenly millions of people could move underground at high speed, and they didn’t have to wait in giant traffic jams of stationary, horse-drawn carriages with the dung piling higher and higher on the cobblestones.

And today, the mass transit system of London is so efficient that every morning it sucks in millions of people on tubes and trains and busses from far outside the capital, and then every evening, it expels them like the digestive tract of a vast undersea cylinder. It does it so fast and so efficiently that they get home in time for their children’s bath time or for an evening gin and tonic. And that’s what we want to do.

Deputy Governor, Commissioner for Transport, I’ve spent enough time in Lagos. It’s wonderful to be here. I’ve spent enough time in Lagos to know that you have the occasional traffic jam, just a little bit. I mean, it’s a sign of dynamism, it’s a sign of growth, it’s a sign of activity, but it’s a barrier to opportunity. It’s a barrier to the unleashing of potential.

I know that you are building wonderful mass transit systems and a metro. How’s it going? Fantastic.

What I want to say to you today in an absolutely unashamed way, as the former chairman of transport for London, let’s do it together. When I was mayor of London – Thank you, Anyiam-Osigwe family. When I was mayor of London, I increased the capacity on the Tube by about 30%, and I built Crossrail, the Elizabeth Line, the biggest engineering project in Europe.

I know you’re doing the first leg, but let’s do the rest of it together. Don’t do it with the Spanish. Don’t do it with the French. Don’t do with the Chinese. Do it with transport for London.

I read that you’re interested in cable cars because it’s such an amazingly beautiful place. You’ve got so much water to cross. I’m proud to say that I built a cable car in less than a year, a huge cable car across the river from Greenwich to Victoria Dock. It’s a huge, beautiful thing. I took Arnold Schwarzenegger up into the cable car, and he looked down on Canning Town, and he said, “Very nice.” And he was right. People made fun of me. I promise you, my political opponents in the Labour Party, they made fun of me, and they said I had built a cable car from nowhere to nowhere across the river.

But you know what happened, not just a year ago? My successor, the new Labour Mayor of London, do you know what he did? He actually moved City hall so that it could be at the foot of the cable car. He did. It’s true; he moved City Hall to be at the foot of the cable car.

And so, like all those projects, the tube upgrades, Crossrail, all the many things we did, that cable car brought people closer to jobs, closer to opportunity, closer to what we’re talking about today, that is, closer to allowing them to fulfill themselves, to express that talent that they have, which is absolutely crucial to their human experience.

And finally, what is the most important thing the state can do and must do to unleash potential? Well, think back to that poem I quoted earlier on, “Full many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark, unfathomable caves of ocean bear. Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air.” What was the state failing to do in 1750 when Thomas Gray stood over the moldering graves of the unlettered poor of the village of Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire? What was it not doing? What’s it got to do? The state must educate, or at least, the state must insist on education for girls, as well as boys, and equal education for both.

I’m proud of the UK system, proud that we have four of the ten best universities in the world, one Cambridge College boasting more Nobel Prizes than Russia and China combined.

By the way, I want to say how wonderful it is for the UK system that so many brilliant Nigerian – and I know this, it’s a fantastic thing for us – so many brilliant Nigerian students choose the UK and continue to do so. But the fact is, they add massively to our country, but we still have too many British kids who cannot do basic arithmetic at the age of 11 and who leave primary school still not able properly to read and write.

And I know that, because I’ve been to see it here in Nigeria, you still have the nihilistic know-nothings of Boko Haram and the Islamic State, these people who literally believe that books are some sort of sacrilege, and who threaten to kill young girls, maim young girls for wanting to read.

I’ve got to say to you, that is evil. That is the extinction of human talent and potential. And that, in my view, is the exact opposite of what Peace Anyiam-Osigwe stood for and the opposite of what this conference is all about. I know how much progress you’ve made in stamping out those deranged and sexist terrorists, and I’m proud of what the UK has been able to do to help.

I want to end with this thought, that now is the time, when the world is so uncertain, when we see free trade breaking down between nations, when barriers are going up, when some nations are disentangling or decoupling from others, now is the time for the UK and Nigeria, two great democracies with so much history in common, to do more together. We should be tackling climate change together. The technology is there. The UK is already one of the world’s greatest producers of offshore wind. It’s unbelievable. I never believed in it 20 years ago, but we now produce more offshore wind than virtually any other country in the world. We’re the Saudi Arabia of offshore wind.

Nigeria could be a renewable superpower, as well as a massive producer of oil and gas. And we certainly can share the technology. You’ve got the technology already. Well, you’ve certainly got the sun here in Nigeria. Not today, but generally speaking. Not in Lagos, I noticed. But you certainly have a more powerful share of the sun than we have in in the UK.

And our trade flows are increasing fast, in spite of the pandemic. I looked at the numbers. They’re going north fast, and that’s a great thing. And we send you all kinds of things to Nigeria, I’m proud to say, from pot noodles – I don’t know why we send you pot noodles – to machine tools. But the Nigerian goods are coming back in ever greater value, not just oil and gas, but thermostats, oscilloscopes. All sorts of high-value products are now coming from Nigeria.

And we could do much, much more, and we could achieve much more investment, mutual investment, particularly, just to make a small political point, if we could end exchange controls. That would be a great thing to do. We did it in 1981. We did it in 1981 in the UK. It was the dawn of the UK under Margaret Thatcher, the UK economic growth and recovery. We can do so much more together.

But the greatest triumphs of all are not the imports and the exports, but the synergies between the UK and Nigeria, the actors who are neither exclusively British, nor exclusively Nigerian, but somehow both at once, the Nollywood films that are financed in London, the Ed Sheeran songs that he records with Fireboy DML. Does anybody know who – you know who Fireboy DML is. The Anglo Nigerian boxers with the knockout punch, and the knockout punch of the black beer that is neither British nor Nigerian, but somehow both at once.

So let’s stick up for the ideas that unite us: free trade, free speech, free elections, no matter how difficult they may seem, or how controversial, not just because they’re nice to have, not just because they feel like good things to have, but because those combination of freedoms are demonstrably the best route to long-term prosperity.

And let’s recognize that our challenges are shared challenges, whether it’s climate change or the instability in the Sahel that triggers both the terrorism and the mass migration that washes up on the shores of the UK. And let’s tackle them together.

Let’s be proud of centuries of common history, from the Nigerians who fought for freedom in Europe in two world wars, to the security and defense partnership that we in the UK have with Nigeria today. Let’s deepen that partnership and let’s do more together to unleash the potential of all the people, of all the people of both our countries.

So thank you very much. Here’s to Nigeria-UK. Thank you to the Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation and thank you all for your kind attention this morning. Thank you.

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