

**WELCOME SPEECH BY CHIMA IBENECHÉ, MANAGING DIRECTOR,
NIGERIA LNG LIMITED, AT THE 5TH GRAND AWARD NIGHT ON 11TH
OCTOBER 2008 AT MUSON CENTRE LAGOS**

Protocols

Good evening and welcome, everyone.

I would like, at the very beginning, to make one little confession: this is the first Grand Award Night my wife and I are attending. So if **Ugo** and **I** appear a little excitable, blame it on lack of any dress rehearsals whatsoever, for I cannot think of anything more difficult than to play host to this impressive assembly.

I am using the word "impressive" tonight, not in the pejorative or deprecatory sense of '**august assembly**', which everyone knows is a much-abused phrase in Nigeria for describing any crowd that defies easy categorisation.

In fact, this is one of those rare occasions in Nigeria that one can say, 'distinguished ladies and gentlemen.' And really mean it! This is, after all, Nigeria's *crème de la crème*. We are glad you found the time to join us.

So thank you all. Thank you. And as **Henry VIII** said to each one of his six wives, "***won't keep you long.***"

Five years ago, we summoned this nation to a common purpose - a higher purpose. And many of you answered the call. And tonight, as we celebrate the fifth anniversary of this noble cause, I note with utmost gladness the presence of so many of you who have served this cause with distinction over the years.

I begin with the Chairman of today's occasion, General Yakubu Gowon and, Chief Ernest Shonekan, our special guest of honour; you both deserve accolades for commitment and dedication. You have graced this occasion, year after year. Your presence, your guidance, your support, have, in no small way, lifted this occasion. Again, thank you for honouring us with your presence.

Shortly after we contacted President Shehu Shagari for this event, flood wrecked havoc in his home town, Shagari, destroying houses, and farm lands. And he became fully engrossed with rehabilitation, counselling, comforting and consoling the victims. Week after week, he was reported to have gone to Shagari for consultation.

We almost concluded that the flood had swept away our dreams of hosting the first executive president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. But just as we were about to give up hope, we got a heart-warming call that President Shagari has requested that his acceptance be couriered to us.

So, tonight, I take liberty to offer the president both our thanks and our condolences. President Shagari has for so long personified the adjective: **gentleman**. Thank you for being such a wonderful example. We are glad to have you with us tonight.

His Excellency, Rt. Honourable David Mark, President of the Senate is with us tonight. Mark has proved himself a man for all seasons. He was a courageous soldier during the war. He was a political soldier during the military rule. He was the first to oppose Gen. Abacha, long before opposition to the late head of state became a badge of honour. His tenure in the Senate has brought stability not only to the upper legislative house, but to the country in general. So in all, Mark has proved himself a good soldier, a good administrator, a capable opposition, a good team player and now a good senate president.

So please **mark** my words, he will, tonight, prove himself a good orator.

Let me quickly welcome the following eminent personalities: Admiral Allison Madueke, former Chief of Naval Staff and his wife deziani, Honourable Minister of Transport, Senator Ike Nwachukwu, Engr. Charles Ugwu, Honourable Minister for Industries, Dr. Jerry Agada, Honourable Minister of State for Education, Ammal Pepple, Head of Service of the Federation and a daughter of the Bonny, the Bishop of Niger Delta Diocese, Rt. Revd. Gabriel Pepple, and of course our former Deputy Managing Director, Mr. Shehu Ladan, who is today representing the Group Managing Director of NNPC, Engr. Lawal Yar'Adua.

I also welcome senators Osita Izunaso, Ayogu Eze, Chris Anyanwu, Olorunimbe Mamora, and Emmanuel Okpede. Distinguished senators, you are welcome to this event.

Since I plan to return to Imo State after my time at Nigeria LNG Limited, let me make haste to welcome Governor Ikedi Dhakim. The governor has been so busy of late with his Clean and Green Initiative that you will understand my surprise and indeed pleasure that he was able to join us.

His presence however can be explained. Where else do you expect a man who won the Nigerian Institute of Management (NIM) young managers' competition prize in 1987 for a paper titled "Segmenting the Industrial Market – A Strategic Option for Survival" and author of several scholarly books to be than in company of learned people. *Ochinawata* I welcome you and congratulations for the award of the Cleanest City in the federation bestowed on Owerri.

A very special welcome to our royal fathers here tonight: His Royal Majesty, King Edward Asimini William Dappa Pepple, Amanyanabo of Grand Bonny Kingdom; His Royal Majesty, Eze Robinson O Robinson, Eze Ekpeye of Ekpeye, His Royal Highness, Chief Burutola, Amananaowei of Kaiama, His Royal Majesty, Eze Desmond Ogugua of Aboh Mbaise, and Eze Isaac Ikonne, Enyi I of Aba. We of course remember, Eze Mathew Ukeje, Udoabia IV, who confirmed that he will be here with us before he unfortunately fell ill. We shall continue to remember him in prayers and to wish him a speedy recovery.

The Chairman of the Board of Directors of NLNG, Chief Osagbonye LongJohn is here with us along with chiefs of Bonny, our host community. Our host communities have always stood shoulder to shoulder with us in all our undertakings. Their presence here tonight is evidence of that. So join me in welcoming this exemplary team.

What we've accomplished these last five years wouldn't have been possible without a solid foundation, one painstakingly laid. And much of that work was done by men and women who were content to make their contributions, knowing their

names would never be publicised; individuals who didn't even make the footage when the documentary of the Grand Award Night was recently aired.

Six years ago, Nigeria LNG Limited invited the Nigerian Academy of Science, the Nigerian Academy of Letters and the Association of Nigerian Authors to join us in the project of promoting science and literature in Nigeria. They overwhelmingly responded to our call and sent us the 24 eminent men and women currently serving on the literature and science committees. These men, women and institutions have been our guide and pillar of support in this difficult, but interesting journey.

Prize administrators occupy an important, yet nearly invisible middle ground in the awards process. Their duties include making rules, setting deadlines, recruiting judges, circulating contest materials, planning awards and sometimes, ceremonies.

However, their real tasks extend well beyond such formalities. Administrators' real job begins as they try to accommodate the many people with different interests that come together around any prize – contestants, publishers, journalists, etc – all bringing their share of connections and cultural capital to the table.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have tried to summarise the great works these great men, women and great institutions do. And so, today let me express my appreciation to all of them. We take pride in the great and good men who have guided these prizes to maturity.

When we started these prizes, science and literature looked a bit hen-pecked and down. I think our prizes have cheered them up, and made them more vibrant.

Seeing the size of this gathering here this evening, the exciting programmes that have been lined up and the media attention these prizes are drawing, and seeing and feeling the drive, energy, and intellectual force flowing from this project, I believe the proof is undeniable: there is hope for science and literature in this country, and you are giving Nigeria a new lease on life.

Looking beyond the administrators, are a small but growing band of Nigerian laureates, scientists and writers, proud winners of **The Nigeria Prize for Literature** and **The Nigeria Prize for Science**. Many of you would admit that the Prize didn't really change you. After the hype, the celebration and the publicity, you all quietly went back to your jobs and resumed your usual chores.

But then, if you are honest to yourselves, you will admit that from the day you won the prize forward, you realised that every work you did, everything you said, everything you wrote, was written by a Nigerian laureate!

It's a new world, a new vista, everything you say, everything you write, everything you do, will be the work of the winner of Nigeria's most prestigious prize.

This will make enormous demands on you, but, I know you will live up to this distinction because your work was widely acclaimed; they met the highest standards that can be applied by our committees and the judges. They survived a field of entries that included the best work of hundreds of talented people.

In every society, intellectuals walk ahead of their times, and it is incumbent upon us, regardless of our occupations, ethnicity and political affiliations, to pay heed to their voices with an open and accepting attitude; only then will we have opportunities to reform this nation.

Ceremonies such as this permit Nigeria and Nigerians to regain confidence to look forward to a bright future in scientific research, and to begin a brilliant new chapter in its history.

I promised earlier that I will make my speech this evening very short indeed. But before I go, I need to raise an issue that I have been chewing for some time. Everywhere prize winning authors experience a sales boom. I cite a few examples: In 1958, Pantheon Books published a translation of a very long novel by a Russian poet. Anticipating some indifference by US readers, Pantheon printed just four thousand copies. Later that year, however, the poet, Boris Pasternak, won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and his book "*Doctor Zhivago*," went on to sell a million

copies in hardcover and five million more in paperback. That Nobel Prize helped transform Pantheon from a small-time publisher into a real profit-making house.

Consider also that sales of Alice McDermott's "*Charming Billy*" tripled immediately after it won the National Book award in the US even though it had been in stores for 10 months previously.

The consensus among editors and publishers seems to be that literary prizes have become more important in the last decade, as publishers and booksellers have grown more adept at taking advantage of them. In France, winning the Prix Goncourt virtually guarantees that a novel's sales will climb from several thousand to several hundred thousands.

To drum up publicity, the French publishing industry has created an awards season—a handful of prizes, announced in the course of a few weeks of each other, with the Goncourt as the centre piece. Consequently, a great many French novels are published around that time, in the hope that they will be vivid in the minds of the judges.

If the Nigerian publishing industry wants to be more economically productive (a big "if," perhaps), here's a modest proposal. Make the best of the rash of prizes springing up here – NLNG Prize, Soyinka Prize, Pat Utomi Prize, ANA Prize, etc – by creating a cultural season around books and literature.

Creating cultural seasons of international dimensions will serve as implicit vehicles for enhancing economic progress and national prestige. If well handled, this might bring about cultural image laundering for Nigeria, same way the Nobel Prize laundered the image of Alfred Nobel, converting his hideous fortune to cultural capital. I think this idea might be worth giving a thought. It might hold the key to improving book sales.

I had promised that this speech will be brief, since I am not the keynote speaker. Another good reason to give a short speech is to ensure that dinner does not go cold.

So permit me, on behalf of the Board and Management of Nigeria LNG Limited, to salute the winner of this year's science prize, Dr Ebenezer Meshida. I also welcome the contenders for this year's literature prize, Mr Jude Dibia and Miss Kaine Agary. Their works, I gather stood out in a huge crowd of 149 entries. I congratulate them for coming thus far. May the best person win!

Thank you all and welcome.

Chima Ibeneche
Managing Director
Nigeria LNG Limited