

OJUKWU AND THE BIAFRA PRINCIPLE

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Being the full text of the remarks by Chibo Onyeji on the occasion of the Wake Keep vigil for the late Eze Igbo Gburugburu, Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, in Vienna, Austria, on Saturday 25 February 2012.

Since His Excellency General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, Eze Igbo Gburugburu, Ijele Igbo, Dikedioranma Ndiigbo, Ikemba Nnewi, passed away in London, on Saturday 26 November 2011, the various tributes to him and his life have been consistent in their unequivocal acknowledgment of his sincerity of purpose, his exemplary courage, his good faith, his integrity, his patriotism, and his love for his people, the Igbo, and Nigeria.

The ultimate icing of this eulogistic cake, as it were --- a cake whose baking was begun by the full pardon granted Ojukwu in exile by President Shagari in 1982 --- was the decision by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to give Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu a state funeral “with full military honours according to military tradition”. For a man who, while he lived, was said in different quarters across the country to have misled his people, to be a nation wrecker, a rebel with inordinate ambitions, a stubborn warlord, to such a man, these consistent eulogies that have been pouring out since his death are very remarkable.

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu was born on 4 November 1933 in Zungeru, Niger State, in northern Nigeria. His father was the transport tycoon, millionaire, Sir Louis Philip Ojukwu from Nnewi who sent Emeka at 13 to study in Britain, first at Eton College, and later at Oxford University where he earned a Masters degree in history. Ojukwu returned to Nigeria in 1956 and became a District Officer in the colonial administration, serving in Udi, Enugu and Aba. In 1957 the young man joined the Nigeria Army, a decision that was a great disappointment to his father who was already displeased with Emeka for not studying law as he had wished and did everything to stop his son from joining the Army.

The son did not only join the Army, but did so as other rank rather than as an officer cadet even though he was a university graduate, in fact one of the few university graduates, and the first Nigerian District Officer. When later he was commissioned into the Nigeria Army, Ojukwu became one of the 15 Nigerian officers out of the 250 officers of the Nigerian Military Forces at the time. He served in the UN peacekeeping force in the Congo under Maj.-Gen. J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi and was subsequently promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1964 and posted to Kano to command the 5th Battalion of the Nigerian Army.

Ojukwu married altogether four wives, one at a time. He married his first wife Elizabeth Okoli from Awka town in Anambra State, in 1957, but she did not have a child. Following their divorce, he married his second wife, Njideka Onyekwelu, from Nawfia, Anambra State in 1964. They had three children: Emeka Jnr, Mimi and Okigbo. Ojukwu married his third wife, Stella Onyeador from Arochukwu in Abia State, and they divorced later in the 1980s. In 1989, he married his fourth wife and widow Bianca Onoh from Udi. They have three children.

So, in what sense do all these eulogies today speak of Ojukwu as *courageous, sincere, patriotic* and *loving*? Simply, in the sense that he remained steadfast in the Biafra principle, and because it is the only legitimate and honourable principle worthy of any modern African state he continued to insist, after he returned to Nigeria from exile, on the same principle for Nigeria.

The Biafra Principle arises from a considered conception of the end and purpose of the modern African state. It is elaborated into the Principles of the Biafran Revolution in the Ahiara Declaration, which Gen. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu as Head of State of the Republic of Biafra delivered on 01 June 1969. The Biafra principle is the “firm conviction that a modern African government worth the trust placed in it by the people, must build a progressive state that ensures the reign of social and economic justice, and of the rule of law.”

It is not by accident that “social and economic justice and the rule of law” are the essence of the Biafra Principle. We must remember that it was not the organized 1966 massacres of people of Eastern Nigerian origin, in particular the Igbo, by Northern Nigerians that caused the then Eastern Region to secede from Nigeria. For although the massacres were terrible enough, Ojukwu continued to lead his people to the negotiating table in search of a peaceful solution within the Nigerian context. It was the subsequent bad faith exhibited by Nigeria in its extremely insensitive failure and refusal to honour and implement to the letter the outcome of what turned out to be the last peaceful negotiations before the war --- the Aburi Accord --- that provided the Easterners sufficient grounds to opt out of the Nigerian federation.

The military coup of 15 January 1966 shook the recently independent country at its roots. With its ethnically uneven toll in casualties this first military uprising watered the seeds of ethnic distrust and loathing; for whereas the plotters and executors of the coup were predominantly of Eastern Nigeria origin the casualties were predominantly of Northern Nigeria origin. Although Ojukwu had nothing whatsoever to do with the coup he went on from his station in Kano to play a significant role in diffusing the momentum of this military coup, which ended up toppling the civilian government of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa. On 17 January 1966, Major-Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi, now Supreme Commander and Head of the Federal Military Government, appointed Ojukwu the Military Governor of the Eastern Region.

A counter coup was staged on 29 July 1966, by a group of Northern Nigerian Army personnel who slaughtered nearly 200 officers and men of Eastern Nigeria origin. This revenge coup brought down the military government of Major-Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi and installed Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon as his successor. 1966 was a fluid year, which also witnessed a spate of organized massacres of people of Eastern Nigeria origin living in the North of the country and elsewhere. On 9 August 1966, representatives of the Military Governors of the East, Mid-West, West, North and Lt.-Col. Gowon met and unanimously agreed on concrete measures for reducing the tension in the country. Gowon, however, failed to implement a number of these agreements including other related agreements with the Military Governor of the East, Ojukwu.

The 1966 massacres came in waves. The first occurred in May apparently in response to Decree No. 34 that established a centralized administration for the country as agreed by the Supreme Military Council led by Major-General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, but probably a venting of the pent-up anger among Northerners for the death of predominantly people of Northern Region origin in the first military coup. The second wave of massacres, which aimed at annihilating all Eastern Nigerian Army Officers and men at Ibadan, Abeokuta and Ikeja in Western Nigeria and at Kaduna, Zaria and Kano in Northern Nigeria happened in July. The third and final wave of the massacres of Easterners, especially the Igbo, swept in in September and was carried out by both Northern Nigeria soldiers and civilians. Of course, Easterners about fifty thousand of whom had been massacred in cold blood had already begun to flee homewards.

The September massacre brought the killings and destruction of lives to a horrendous climax. While tens of thousands of Easterners, in particular the Igbo, were maimed, raped and slaughtered in cold blood in the North and other parts of the country the Federal Government of Nigeria was doing virtually nothing to stop the madness. With very little sense of security and belonging left among Easterners, Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, provided badly needed leadership by courageously asking the Easterners living in the other parts of the country especially in the North, to come back to the safety of the East. Their homeward flight was a monumental movement in populations that posed serious economic and social problems.

By this time, the Nigeria Army had virtually disintegrated. In the circumstance, the mass movement of populations and the lack of measures to deal with the national chaos at the federal level, intensified Regional loyalties and made it extremely difficult if not impossible for any one person to command the loyalty of all sections of the country.

In the hope of finding feasible solutions to the problems, the Supreme Military Council met in Aburi, Ghana, during 4-5 January 1967 and deliberated over the dire situation in the country. At Aburi, Ojukwu challenged the authority of Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon as the Supreme Commander and Head of the Federal Military Government, and refused to recognize him as such because (a) the fate of Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, the legitimate Supreme Commander, was yet unknown and so no one, Ojukwu argued, could succeed him; (b) that in the absence of Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi whoever was the next senior officer in rank should manage the affairs of the country; and (c) that the Eastern Region was never party to any decision to appoint Lt.-Col. Gowon Supreme Commander. This characteristic democratic objection and insistence by Ojukwu on the rule of law and on the respect for constituted authority prompted Lt.-Col. Gowon to disclose to the Supreme Military Council there in Aburi that the Supreme Commander and Head of the Military Government of Nigeria, Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi and his host, Lt.-Col. Adekunle Fajuyi, had been murdered on 29 July, 1966.

At the end, the Supreme Military Council unanimously reached and agreed an Accord. The Aburi Accord spelled out quite clearly the measures to be taken by the Federal and Regional Governments of Nigeria in order to restore peace, order and confidence in the federation and in the federal government, and move the country forward.

However, upon return from Aburi, Nigeria reneged on the Aburi Agreements and refused to implement them. By not honouring the Aburi Accord, the Nigerian leadership ignored the anxiety of the Nigerian public for a workable and effective settlement of the crisis and a quick return to

normal conditions. What this bad faith of Nigeria did was to confirm the fears of the Easterners that the plan of Nigeria and, in particular the North, was to perpetuate the pogrom and exterminate them, especially, the Igbo.

When, therefore in self defense, the Easterners asked Ojukwu to declare, in their behalf, the Eastern Region as an independent, sovereign Republic, it was in pursuit of a new home that would provide them what Nigeria had failed to offer them, namely: *social and economic justice* and *the rule of law*. Ojukwu was astute enough to recognize the import of this urgent call of history and brave enough to accept and embrace the challenge despite the very difficult conditions under which his people had called on him to lead them.

On 30 May 1967, he declared in their behalf the Eastern Region including its continental shelf and territorial waters, the sovereign and independent Republic of Biafra. In accepting to lead his people out of Nigeria to build a new, more equitable, peaceful society, Ojukwu demonstrated tremendous leadership and courage. But Lt.-Col. Gowon responded to the declaration of Biafra with the declaration of war on the new country on 6 July 1967 and Nigeria attacked Biafra. Towards the end of the war in January 1970 Ojukwu went into exile in the Ivory Coast and remained there till 1982 when he was granted a full pardon by President Shehu Shagari. Subsequently, benefits accruing to Ojukwu as a retired military officer of the Nigeria Army were restored to him. Ojukwu was a quintessence Nigerian who spoke fluent Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo his mother tongue.

Precisely because Ojukwu rose to the occasion and answered the call of history, Ojukwu would later be accused of leading his people astray, of being a nation wrecker. But none of these accusers ever stopped to ask why the Federal Government refused to honour the Aburi Agreement, for example, the provision concerning the displaced Easterners, namely, that “civil servants and Corporation staff (including daily paid employees) who have not been absorbed should continue to be paid their full salaries until 31 March, 1967 provided they have not got alternative employment.” To have honoured this agreement would have been an indication on the part of the Federal Government of the will to begin to restore *social and economic justice*.

No matter how one looks at it now, and irrespective of the side on which one sits, the indisputable fact remains that the financial cost of paying the salaries of these displaced civil servants till the end of March 1967 would have been altogether a pittance compared to the actual financial cost (alone) of prosecuting the war for three bloody years! (And, of course, the cost of the war is not only financial but includes human and other costs as well.) Let us remember that at Aburi, Ojukwu was never concerned with any compensation for lost lives and property of the Easterners, but only that the returnees be helped with managing their livelihoods for a while. Paying the salaries of those civil servants till the end of March 1967 was certainly not asking too much nor was paying the salaries beyond the ability of the Federal Government. Those who have been quick to accuse Ojukwu for starting the war must know that if the salaries of the displaced civil servants had been paid as agreed in Aburi, it would have been very unlikely for the Easterners to have nursed the fear of extermination, and secession might not have been an easy option for them.

Also, the Aburi Agreement stipulated that “During the period of the Military Government, Military Governors will have control over Area Commands for internal security.” Again, to have honoured this agreement would have been an indication, on the part of the Federal Government,

of the will to begin to restore *the rule of law*. For trust in Federal security had so completely dissipated that the hope of restoring any sense of security in the four-region country could only begin with the exercise of Regional authority. When therefore in a December 2011 piece on the developments that led to the Biafra-Nigeria war, the Governor of Central Bank of Nigeria, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, said: “The Igbos themselves must acknowledge that they have a large part of the blame for shattering the unity of this country,” one wonders in which country he is living. Even without exactly mentioning Ojukwu by name, it is clear that Sanusi was echoing the idea that Ojukwu was a nation wrecker.

Of course, this ill-considered view of Ojukwu as misleading his people and breaking up a unified country derived from (i) gross insensitivity, (ii) the sentimental belief that the colonial borders of Nigeria were sacrosanct, inviolable, and (iii) the belief that preserving the colonial borders was primary. But for Ojukwu and the Biafra Principle, territory was not the issue; more important, more relevant than territory was the humanity of the people in a territory expressed in *social and economic justice* and *the rule of law*. Ojukwu firmly believed that providing social and economic justice and the rule of law was the least a government, any government, could do for its people, and so to his eternal credit was never prepared to negotiate this simple, basic principle. The Governor of Niger state understands this very well when he says: "I Dr. Mu'azu Babangida Aliyu from my studies know that, I will take up arms to defend my people if confronted with similar circumstances that Ojukwu found himself that time." It usually takes a while, but *the* truth always manages to surface eventually.

Given the tremendous outpouring of goodwill and gratitude for Ojukwu it would appear that Sanusi got it all wrong especially his conclusion that: “There is a new Igbo man, who was not born in 1966 and neither knows nor cares about Nzeogwu and Ojukwu.” Obviously, he is still indulging in the same misreading and underestimation of a people that contributed in leading to the war. Yes, there is today a new Igbo man who was not born in 1966, but this Igbo man has demonstrated much affection for Ojukwu and a deep sense of loss at his passing. The Igbo, both young and old, certainly do care for and about Ojukwu who, much earlier in life, had demonstrated his aversion to injustice, his ability for courage, solidarity, patriotism and love for his fellow Nigerians when in 1944 he assaulted a white British colonial teacher for humiliating a black woman at King’s College in Lagos, where began his educational career, and was incarcerated therefore.

At a time when everybody was avoiding the truth, Ojukwu, driven by the Biafra Principle, was courageous and sincere enough to insist that there was nothing sacrosanct about the colonial boundaries of Nigeria or of any African country for that matter. Later on, events throughout the world would prove Ojukwu right about the secondariness of borders: the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, the Sudan, have all broken up into smaller states including, ironically, Ethiopia the very seat of the OAU, which vehemently opposed any tampering with the colonial boundaries in Africa, and in particular Biafra’s re-drawing of the colonial map of Nigeria.

After Ojukwu returned from exile as a Nigerian, Biafra continued to be for him, a principle. Although the Biafran State had eluded him, the Biafra Principle and to a large extent the Principles of the Biafran Revolution were still important and relevant to him. The recent testimony of former military leader, Gen. Ibrahim Gbadamose Babangida makes this point quite clearly:

[Ojukwu] was a rare gem, a strong advocate for better society and strong believer in the equitable distribution of power and political bargaining...Dim Ojukwu's patriotism about the oneness of the country was not in doubt. He believed that given the country's diverse socio-political and cultural configurations, the nation-states within the nation must be given room to flourish in a mutually exclusive arrangement that would further the aspiration of the country.

It is remarkable that from the time Ojukwu returned from exile in Ivory Coast till his death, he maintained his part of the bargain of the pardon granted him by the President of the Republic of Nigeria. Once he became again a *bona fide* Nigerian, he set about to work for the betterment and progress of the country. He was patriotic to the core and continued to advocate for a better society and to believe strongly in the *equitable distribution of power and political bargaining*. At no time was he sentimental about Biafra. But he never missed an opportunity to remind Nigeria and Nigerians that the conditions that led to the Biafra-Nigeria war were still very much alive and needed to be addressed urgently as a precondition for a unified, prosperous, peaceful, progressive Nigeria.

But the Biafra Principle is really nothing new. It's just that Biafra and the Biafrans laboured in a unique way and at tremendous cost to make it a reality. After all, the Tiv riots led by Joseph Tarka of the Middle Belt, the rebellion of the Action Group in the West of the country led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the revolt led by Adaka Boro from the Rivers province, and the contemporary demands of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), are all agitations for a *progressive state that ensures the reign of social and economic justice and of the rule of law*. But whereas all these earlier efforts pursued this universal principle rather timidly, Biafra gave it a bold, decisive content, resonance and life. One of the achievements of Ojukwu is that he was consistent throughout the ordeal, providing purposeful leadership that gave this universal principle the stamp of Biafra.

Ojukwu's committed fight and advocacy for *social and economic justice* and *the rule of law* is his value and relevance into the future. He was born into wealth, privileged; and yet he spent his life fighting for the powerless, speaking for the voiceless and fighting for the betterment of the underprivileged. His demonstrated sincerity of purpose, his exemplary courage, his good faith, his integrity, his patriotism, his steadfastness, and his love for his people, the Igbo, and Nigeria are all his endearing and enduring legacies. They are for us all to emulate.

Ojukwu proposed a model for restructuring Nigeria and it is up to us to seriously consider it if we want to get out of the vicious circle we are currently in. Ojukwu led the short-lived country that taught us all that the notion of sacred colonial boundaries is sentimental foolishness, if the supposed sacredness of boundaries is valued much more than the humanity of the federating peoples within the boundaries.

At death, ironically, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu became a symbol of Nigerian unity. Nigeria has now a great opportunity to capitalize on the Ojukwu phenomenon and cultivate patriotism, oneness, justice and unity. Nigeria must learn what it can from the Ojukwu phenomenon. Nigeria and Nigerians dare not waste this rare opportunity the way they have been accustomed to wasting the many other resources and opportunities Nigeria has been privileged to possess.

May his soul rest in perfect peace.

Chibo Onyeji