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## Interview: C.O. Ojukwu

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# One thing is certain: We are moving in the right direction

*Chief Chukiouenka Odumegwu Ojukwu is a delegate to the National Constitutional Conference, and was the military leader of the 1967 Biafra War. He was interviewed by Uwe Friesecke and Lawrence Freeman in Abuja.*

**EIR:** How did you become a member of the Constitutional Conference?

**Ojukwu:** Like everybody else, we were invited by the government to stand for elections, to compete, so I went back to my ward in my village in Anambra state. It was an election that was one of the fairest, because it was not based on any party affiliations, but on individual personalities. I won my ward elections. Then a constituency was made out of two local governments for the the Constitutional Conference; I won on that, and that made me a delegate to the Constitutional Conference. It is a straightforward type of election, in that everybody knows everybody else; it is an election, technically speaking, but you might even call it *selection*, because you are dealing with your kith and kin at a ward level. When you move on to the other side, that is, the major election, the two local government elections there, you might know about 10% of your own local government, but then there is also the other local government, and you might know nobody at all. It was great fun. There wasn't much campaigning. They either know you or they don't. As luck would have it, here I am at Abuja.

**EIR:** What were your expectations when you came to this conference?

**Ojukwu:** I didn't know what to expect. I know that Nigeria has had all of these efforts at constitution-making, but each time they seemed to sort of bypass me. I was either in exile or fighting or something like that. So I have never really had experience at the constitutional drafting effort. I believed, however, that the country was on the threshold of something. We were in a crisis, a crisis that came from the disagreements over the June 12 [1993] elections, the elections that were annulled. I looked personally at the conference as a peace conference. There is nowhere I go that I still don't carry a bit of the stigma of the Nigeria-Biafra war, which has never really had a peace conference. I looked upon the whole question of drawing up a constitution as a genuine peace conference for Nigeria, a peace conference that would try and repair all the various crises which we've had since independence. I came

forward here absolutely committed to playing a part in finding mutual accommodation for every Nigerian within Nigeria.

**EIR:** What is your vision of Nigeria?

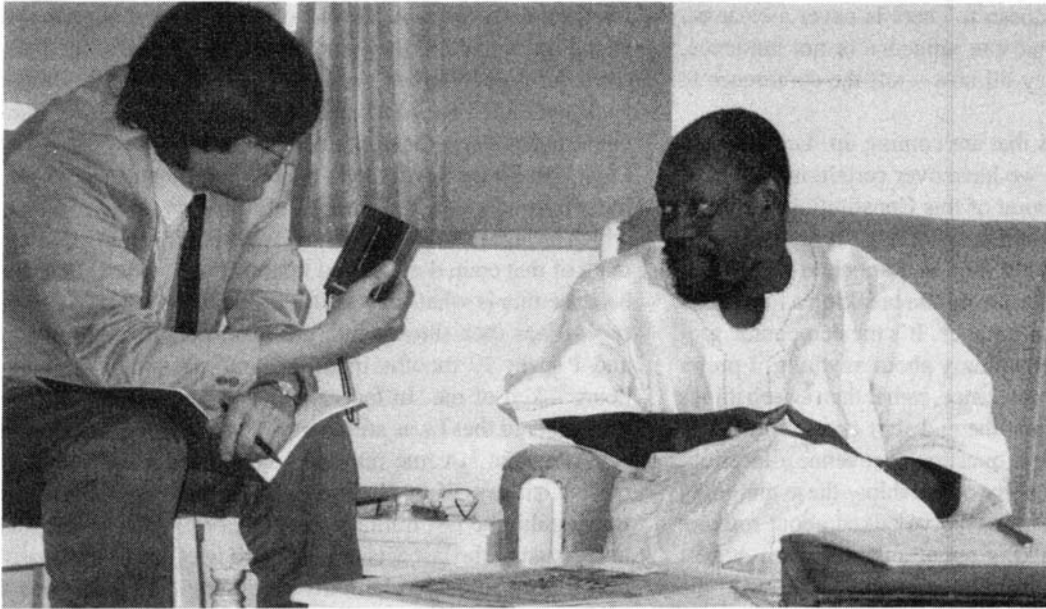
**Ojukwu:** The Nigeria I see, must be a Nigeria that has a worldview. A Nigeria that contributes, not just consumes. A Nigeria that takes its full responsibility of statehood. A Nigeria that is *justifiedly* jealous of her own sovereignty. I look for a Nigeria, actually, where our primordial instincts will be subsumed in the new nation, where everybody would actually, within Nigeria, feel as brothers. Once you are outside the country, it is easy to be united, but I like to see that occur within.

I look for a Nigeria, certainly, that will not just be the biggest and the most populous nation in Africa. No. I would like to see a Nigeria that takes also the first responsibility on African issues. I would like to see a Nigeria that would be the first, whenever there are refugees moving about in Africa and people are starving, the first to come in and help. I want a Nigeria that is at peace, because only in peace can we develop. I see a Nigeria where everybody is his brother's keeper, takes that responsibility. A country that would be able to defend the rights of the Nigerian citizen, even outside Nigeria. I would like a Nigeria, finally, to which all black men on earth would point with pride. This is what we would like to be like. Whenever that happens, Nigeria would be a better place.

**EIR:** Despite the shortcomings of the Constitutional Conference, can you point to some results and accomplishments?

**Ojukwu:** Yes. A veritable revolution has taken place. One of the things that we have had is this feeling that a certain part of the country monopolizes power. Last week, after a series of heated debates, Nigeria decided there would be a rotation of the presidency—this is a visible symbol of power—between the North and the South, and it will continue alternating. Already, people are working and discussing with greater freedom. In fact, when everybody talks about June 12 and the last election and all those things, a lot of people felt that the reason the election was annulled, was the possibility of power shifting. So, today, we have recommended it be entrenched in our constitution that power will shift.

In the name of democratization, the idea that Nigeria has



*Chief Ojukwu is interviewed by Uwe Friesecke in Abuja. "Nigeria has only been free for 34 years. I would like, before anyone comments adversely on Nigeria, for them to look back and read their own histories, and see how many years it took them to get away from what is the normal Nigerian situation today. If you look at the context, you will find that in certain areas, we have not done badly."*

firmly decided to be a multiparty state, a multiparty democracy, is a landmark decision also. I believe we've moved on further. We have tried to cut the umbilical cords that attached us to primeval times, in our decisions on this question of the traditional rulership.

Two things I say about this that I love repeating: Nigeria cannot be the only country in the world in step; if we are out of step, if people are moving away from traditional rulership and we are moving into it, then let us accept that we are the ones out of step. It looks to me as if we are very proudly marching steadfastly backwards into the caves, if we continue that line. It seems that is what is most important in our minds, that Nigeria wants to tell everybody, "I am free and I have a culture." And I say, that is all well and good when it is being disputed. But honestly, since 1960, everybody has agreed that we are free and we have a culture, so stop singing it. Face now the real challenge. We've got independence, independence as a state. The challenge is that we must now take that state and build it into a nation. That is the challenge—that is what we must get on.

I think already we have discussed about four reports, and the direction certainly augurs very well for the future. I am proud of the little achievements so far, particularly when taken in the context that nobody really initially—let us say only a few people—believed in the possibilities of a Constitutional Conference. We have been going on for three and a half months. Europe is now getting interested, and you are now interviewing us to find out more. So that's indicative also of the success of the Constitutional Conference.

**EIR:** Was the issue of the unity of the nation sufficiently addressed?

**Ojukwu:** No. At the back of my mind, I think there is time

for it. The unity of the nation. Everybody started off, hand on chest, proclaiming the unity and the indivisibility of the state. Very nice, but I would like personally to see it placed as a matter of national referendum. Perhaps not separately, but with the whole result of the Constitutional Conference. Now, having said this, actually you don't raise problems where problems don't seem to exist. Practically everybody that spoke either said or presupposed that there was no question about the nation being split. And so that problem is not really a Nigerian problem, certainly not at the Constitutional Conference. We all agree. We accept it.

Now you look at me and you say, "You're the head of state of Biafra. How do you find this?" I tell you, "Yes, I was, and in fact, and to a large number of people, I am still treated as the head of state of Biafra." But the point is that we are talking now, after how many years? Practically 30 years. We have evolved along a certain direction and we have made a lot of sacrifices in this country. Unity is a good thing, because it is the only way we justify the sacrifice. On the other hand, unity is not [to be had] at all costs. Hence, the need for this conference, and we are working toward ensuring that actually the united Nigeria that we find justifies the sacrifice we have made.

**EIR:** Are you under any pressure from the military in your deliberations during the conference?

**Ojukwu:** No. We are not. It is rather funny. All the military, ex-military members of the Constitutional Conference who wield a certain influence were either at one time my student or they were directly under my command, and you know what happens in the military. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir," all the way. So, no. General Abacha—I see him quite regularly. Sometimes I wonder whether he could not try to even influ-

ence a *little* bit—but he doesn't. There is never a clear-cut place or point at which one can influence or not influence. He has till now—and I say till now—left the conference to do its work.

There are other issues that are coming up. I cannot pretend that the tension that we have over certain issues today are going to be the high point of this Constitutional Conference, and in fact I keep telling people to be prepared. If Khrushchov can take off his shoe and knock at the United Nations table, don't think we won't be breaking a few chairs in due course. But it doesn't matter. It's the democratic process, and if we really feel strongly about anything, I prefer that we bring it up at this conference, rather than sweep things under the carpet, and then at the end start grumbling again. There are issues—the whole question of revenue allocation, the whole question of property ownership—these are going to be great subjects of debate. We've talked about rotating the presidency. We're talking about an individual, at best we're talking about the elite class. Let us now move to the question of power-sharing or even the specific powers the executive should have—these are major points.

I went into this, in answer to this question of military interference. The commander-in-chief has said to us, and has taken every opportunity to reaffirm, that the military will not interfere and our results will not be thrown aside lightly—whatever that means, but it is always repeated. We hope that they will not turn away from our recommendations. On this issue also, I feel that in view of the polarization in the country that brought about this conference, it would be unwise not to allow the conference to run its course. I hope that it will, but we will get to some hotter areas yet.

**EIR:** You mentioned that you were in exile. Could you discuss what led to that condition?

**Ojukwu:** In 1966, there was an attempted coup d'état in Nigeria, which cost the nation a number of its top leadership—the prime minister, the premier of the North, the premier of the West, and a few other ministers. As a result of that, the rump of the cabinet finding itself in a rather curious situation where it could not effectively command the nation or loyalty, invited the then-head of the Army, General Ironsi to take over and to bring the country back to law and order. It was in the context of that, that I was appointed governor of the eastern region of Nigeria. While governor of the eastern region, a countercoup took place, which cost the nation the head of state. General Ironsi and his host Fajuyi and I rejected that coup, and on the Lagos side, this brought about General Gowon's position; this is how he emerged as the President of Nigeria.

But I, rejecting that coup, eventually had to fight against the federal government and that war lasted practically three years, ending in January 1970. It is unfortunate that the only thing people remember of the war is the picture of starving children; we lost quite a lot of manpower, we lost a lot of

innocent manpower. At the end of the war, I left Nigeria and ended up in exile in the Ivory Coast for 13 years. In 1982, the federal government of Nigeria invited me back. I came back and joined one of the parties in Nigeria at that time, and contested as a senator from my constituency. It was said that I lost, but I have never really agreed that I lost. In any case, the whole election was in fact nullified by a coup d'état, which brought into preeminence General Buhari. In the aftermath of that coup d'état—and I put this in inverted commas, because this is what they said, they said for my own "safety"—I was then thrown into the maximum security prison and I spent 10 months in it, without one single question being asked of me. In fact, I was worried whether anyone remembered that I was still there.

After that, I came out and I have been since trying to reestablish myself in Nigerian life. It was under President Babangida, the last military leader prior to Abacha—it was in fact one of the last acts of his period in office—that finally I have been able to reclaim my patrimony. My father was a businessman, and all his property was seized, and it was agreed that it would be released. He [Babangida] did that. And it was also, as it were, a symbolic break from public enemy number one, because I then began to have interaction with the Nigerian government on a more positive basis. I have talked already about how I became a candidate and won my election, and now I am in the Constitutional Conference.

**EIR:** Given your involvement in the 1967 war, how do you view the statement that we have heard here, that in the fall of 1993, the Shonekan government was leading toward a replay of the 1967 civil war and that there would have been a war if Gen. Sani Abacha had not come into the government.

**Ojukwu:** I don't go for all these very slick commentaries. People look for words that are like a sound byte or something. The objective of politicians is to manufacture such things. But really, no two situations are exactly alike. Human nature does not permit an absolute repeat.

The situation in Nigeria during the Shonekan era was in fact a tense, very tense situation. That situation was also hyped very much by the southwestern Nigerian media, which were under the complete control of the people of the southwest, from whence came Abiola. So outside the country, people got a rather distorted view of what was happening. Yes, there was arson, but it was localized in the southwest. People went on strike, yes, but again, only in the southwest. People were attacked in the streets, yes, but only in the southwest. And it is unfortunate for Nigeria that the first capital of Nigeria, Lagos, is situated in the southwest, so that Lagos, even though we have a new capital [Abuja], has for all intents and purposes remained our window to the world. The diplomats come in and see Lagos and say, "My God, this is terrible."

The one thing you can say, is that our difficulties began before the crisis and they are still going on: getting few

[goods] and distributing few; and no matter what anyone says, the few we are talking about is petrol. If you own a car, you need petrol, so [the lack of petrol] also creates a distortion and an image of the crisis, because it is those who were most vociferous who actually suffered the need. But the crisis in Nigeria was really that she was questioning herself: Do we go on with Nigeria and its various imperfections, or do we go back to the drawing boards? Those were the two points, actually. I approached it from going back again to the drawing boards.

The southwest wanted to force the issue by getting a certain individual proclaimed President. The crisis became one, wrongly, of an ethnic group, the Yorubas, versus the rest of Nigeria. It was either one of an individual—that is, Abiola versus Nigeria—or a national question. But somehow they opted for the one ethnic group image, which, of course, destroyed that struggle, whatever it had in it. A short answer to your question: We were in a crisis, but not quite the crisis that brought about warfare.

**EIR:** The British press has continually portrayed Nigeria as being under the control of this Hausa north and in continual conflict with the Yoruba southwest and the Ibo southeast. How do you respond to these broad characterizations?

**Ojukwu:** Like all broad-based characterizations, they are mostly false and they are used for effect. It is true that since independence, the two democratic governments we have had have been headed by individuals from the North. There is no doubt about it. As an easterner, I resent it. I would prefer it if the two were headed by easterners. Okay? Now, the other thing you will find is that what should really be an interregnum became the norm; that is, all the military regimes have started off headed by the North, unless of course you count Ironsi, who didn't last quite a year. Then there was the remnant of Murtala Muhammed's government, which created the preeminence of Obasanjo.

When you look at Nigeria, yes, northerners have tended to occupy the seat of power—the presidency. The rest of Nigeria, which has not had that luck, resented the phenomenon. The English press is being less than honest when they now make it an issue, because it is the very same British who distorted Nigeria, who created the Nigerian federation that was structurally unbalanced.

The theory of federalism is that not one unit should be able alone to dominate the rest, but the federalism that was handed over to our leaders at the last independence conference was precisely that anathema to all political philosophers. How then do they blame the North? You're in politics in search of power—that is what all politicians do. Any other thing you say is a form of propaganda. The North got power at independence and they have held onto it, one way or another, by fair or foul means, until today. That is the way we see it. Now my answer, of course, is: We are all Nigerians. They have every right to have power, as we have to seek

power, but let us restructure Nigeria to enable everybody to have access to that power and also to enable power to be sufficiently decentralized or shared in a manner that the endemic fears of Nigerians would not make the access to power by any group an apparent tyranny to the others. So this is the real issue. I believe it is that structural imbalance that we just have to straighten out.

**EIR:** What is your sense of what has gone wrong during the last 20 years of economic development? There have been abundant resources from the export of oil, but today you find the country in a dire crisis.

**Ojukwu:** The problem, as I see it, is one of management. The Nigerians, including myself, have not been able to manage our resources. Why have we not been able to manage our resources? Because we have tended to politicize everything. And as far as Nigeria is concerned, it is always politics first. There is no way you can run the affairs of this country, if you are not able to apply sanctions to people who misrule or who commit crimes. There is no way you can expect Nigeria to turn her economy around when there is no accountability, and there is no accountability because it is looked upon as perks of office—you know, the clique in power considers every resource as a perk of office.

I believe you are right to criticize Nigeria, but what I keep asking is, please, let us have more understanding. We are on the road to changing the structure of our politics in such a way that everyone will have access, and we are also reviewing all our economic activity to enable us to structure them better. We are at the same time considering most seriously what to recover of lost assets. It is in fact because everything has been politicized, and everything is considered legitimate loot: When you capture a land, you loot it; when you capture power, you loot the treasury, that sort of thing. I do believe that when we have finished this conference, when we have balanced Nigeria, the true talent of Nigeria will begin to emerge.

There are a lot of things we waste a lot of money on that we don't need to do. I do not speak with tongue in cheek. I know that in the period that I call the early period of true freedom in Africa—the years during the war I was honored to lead one side of—we were under total blockade for three years. But we lived. And I must say we lived better than we are living today in Nigeria. Petrol? We refined our petrol. We had pitching units. My state house had its own refinery, and I was never short of petrol throughout the war. This was thrown away. We built our roads—we used a different mixture from the waste of the oil refinery. Somehow we were able to tar roads, quicker, cheaper, and that dried firmer. These are technologies that we developed ourselves. I was able to speak practically to the entire world from the back of a lorry that had to move every two hours. But it was done. These are the kinds of things that make people take hold of their destiny and make something of whatever they have.

Nigerians do not yet look upon themselves as Nigerian. They look upon themselves as people coming from various areas, and the center is only there for looting. Once you can get anything from the center and take it back home, you are a hero. So you need to set the politics right. We all have to feel that we belong to an entity and then we can be proud of that entity and we can develop that entity. These are the things we haven't done.

**EIR:** What has been the effect of the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programs?

**Ojukwu:** Disastrous. There is no doubt about that. It affects not just the economy, but even our own confidence, because we find ourselves nowadays constantly looking over our shoulder for Big Brother: Does he approve of what we are doing? We would appreciate friends; we would appreciate advice. But there is no way we can accept or welcome direct interference or what appears to us to be an infringement on our sovereignty. The general propositions set by the IMF and the World Bank might have clear global advantages, but there is no way they have been able to be sensitive also to the internal pressures to the various countries of Africa, and this is why actually there is an idea going about, almost to taunt Nigeria, that Ghana has turned around—which I don't believe.

Irrespective of that, everywhere these external demands have been forced, we have had greater upheavals than before. I think the time has come actually to sit round a table again. Yes, a great deal of Europe was built on the sweat of Africa. I am not talking in direct terms about reparations, but let aid be aid. I think you understand what I mean. To expect us to be paying out 40% of our national revenue purely to service debt, means that we will never come out of it, and I think it is better for world peace actually that we get around and try to find accommodation. I will not prescribe—I have my own ideas, and I hope that before I die I will have the opportunity to make the point. Any solution that does not envisage a certain write-off by the ex-colonial powers of the debt incurred by their former wards will not work.

**EIR:** How do you look at proposals for a new world economic order that would restructure a world monetary system for large-scale infrastructure projects—a railroad line from Djibouti to Dakar, or the diversion of water resources from Central Africa into the Lake Chad area, as a foundation for real economic development of the continent?

**Ojukwu:** Forgive me if I do not go into detail about global economy or a pan-African economy, because we are involved in a real struggle here and that is to live till tomorrow. All these would work, but the seed of sovereignty that has been sown makes the internal problem of one country its absolute priority. When I say that the people are starving in Rwanda, don't tell me that the answer is to build the east-west transept across Africa. It would eventually be built, and the Rwandans, if they lived, might benefit from it. I think

these huge efforts, or rather ideas, are very much alive, much to be encouraged, but I don't see much coming out of them immediately. They will be very good as subjects in universities for people to study and perfect.

But what we need is 1) to feed our people, and that with effect from yesterday; 2) to clothe our people, with effect from yesterday; 3) to heal our people, with effect from the day before yesterday; and 4) to educate our people, with effect from today. What I am saying is that our problems are so basic, and we must find immediate solutions to these problems.

When I was in Biafra, I had so many blueprints for the agricultural transformation of Biafra. I said, no, that's not where the problem lies. What I want is to be able to produce the basic staple food for the Biafran people and make it accessible to everybody. That is cassava—that will give you your carbohydrates. Rabbits—I am told they are the best protein converters, and most prolific. Even though people didn't eat rabbits, but in the war situation they had to. The important issue is the immediate action. I would like to see, no matter what has been discussed about a new world order, an immediate action to save Africa.

**EIR:** What would your message be to the United States and Europe for Nigeria?

**Ojukwu:** I cannot state with much pride that we have achieved a great deal since independence. I cannot, no matter how one looks at it, say that I am proud of our societies that have developed since independence. But what I can say, and this is affirmative, is that what we have achieved in our societies is real. Nigeria has only been free for 34 years. I would like, before anyone comments very adversely on Nigeria, for them to look back and read their own histories, and see how many years it took them to get away from what is the normal Nigerian situation today. If you look at the context, you will find that in certain areas, we have not done badly.

I would point out one particular area. I, a longtime general who led a war we fought, am today a member of a constitutional assembly trying to put Nigeria right. I don't know how many places in Europe you would find such accommodation in such a short time. In America, they are still fighting over symbols of the Civil War. I ask and I request governments that are interested in Nigeria to remember at all times that their interest is more the people of Nigeria, rather than the market of Nigeria. I request that they show understanding and accommodation. That is what is expected of friends. I request that they note that sometimes we are too jealous of our sovereignty to accept correction, and that the best help we can have is actually sometimes accommodating our excesses. One thing is certain: We are moving today in the right direction. Help us move faster. We cannot become Britain; we cannot become Germany. But we hope that the Nigeria we are going to become will also be as proud as Britain, Germany, France, the United States.