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General Emeka Ojukwu: A tribute

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I have never referred to our subject by any title other than *General.* It is either Emeka Ojukwu or General Emeka Ojukwu. Nothing else. But by insisting on this identification - even at his death -1 do not intend to insult the feelings of many Nigerians who sincerely regard Emeka Ojukwu as a hero and icon and had given him several titles and honours: *Chief, Dim, Ikemba, Ezeigbo Gburugburu,* etc These are, indeed great titles. All 1 have been saying by my insistence is that the titles and honours should not, for whatever reasons, be used as "replacements' for *General.* They can, however, be used as additional titles and honours, which Emeka Ojukwu acquired after he had attained the status of *General.*

My position is not legalistic. It is *ideological:* I believe that given the criteria for awarding this title in Nigeria since the country's political independence in I960, and given the character and history of the Civil War and The events that led to it, Emeka Ojukwu deserves the title *General* as much as, or to the ex-tent that, any other Nigerian General -dead or alive -deserves it.

Beyond this, however. my position derives from my fundamental proposition on the Nigerian Civil War (or Nigeria-Biafra war), 1967-1970. That proposition may be

stated like this: Given what happened in Nigeria in January, May, July, and September - November 1966, only a radical intervention that aimed of correcting the grave and tragic mistakes the "five army majors" committed in January 1966 and advancing their original revolutionary programme (of social transformation)could have prevented a civil war, or could have brought it to a quick end after it started. Interventions of this type were actually attempted. But they all failed - some more disastrously than the others. In retrospect, I can now see that none of them had a good chance of success.

The forms the almost inevitable war could take if it broke out, its geopolitics and diplomacy, its ideology and propaganda, its resilience, its strategy and tactics – all would depend on the character of the forces in power in Lagos and Enugu. Debates on the larger subject from which my proposition emanates have been going on for about 45 years and will continued. But one idea I have ruled out completely as unhistorical and unscientific is that, given the events of 1966, Emeka Ojukwu chose war instead of peace. My intense study of this conflict over the years convinces me that it was almost inevitable.

I was riding in a car in Calabar with two young men the day after Ojukwu died. They started a discussion on Ojukwu and the Nigerian Civil War. The younger one said something that made me cut in. I asked him: "Man, answer the question: Who started the war?" He said, "Ojukwu". His colleague concurred. Then I asked when the war started, and where? None of them knew the answer to either of the two questions. I told them that the current public knowledge is that the shooting war started on July 6, 1967 at two points on the northern border of their state, Cross River State. The two of them turned sharply to look at me. I allowed some time to elapse before I added: " But the question of who fired the first shot is immaterial. When two bitterly opposed armies face each other across a border that is undefined, any sound or movement could start the shooting. The Nigerian Civil War became inevitable by the end of 1966".

Although my knowledge and opinion of Emeka Ojukwu and the Civil War have developed over the years and decades since the war, this "near-inevitability" element has remained. "The Civil War of 1967 – 1970 was an inevitable event in the history of Nigeria", says Anthony Akinola in his tribute to Emeka Ojukwu (Ojukwu and national unity; The Guardian, December 5, 2011). His reason? "The imbalance in our political structure suggested it was always on the cards… I have always held the view that we could still have

fought a war at a later stage of our history if we have not experienced an earlier one". I would endorse Akinola's general proposition. It does not, of course, validate my special proposition, but it gives me pleasure that I am not so isolated in the use of the method and perspectives by which I arrived at my conclusion.

A few days after General Ojukwu's death, an older brother of mine phoned to offer condolences to me. When he mentioned "condolence" I thought he was referring to Alex Ibru, the publisher of *The Guardian,* who died a week before Ojukwu. But my brother said he meant "double condolence": Ibru and Ojukwu. It was clear how my brother knew that Ibru's death was a personal bereavement for me. But I think he sensed my bemusement in regard to Ojukwu and quickly added that Ojukwu and I had "something" in common. He tried to find the exact word and I helped him: radicalism. I told my brother that the attribute he saw was not just radicalism, but radicalism-plus-integrity. As the line went off, I added: "but Ojukwu was not a socialist." My brother said nothing to this.

It was Kayode Komolafe of *ThisDay* Newspapers who phoned me late in the night of Saturday, November 26, 2011, to announce the death of Emeka Ojukwu. After agreeing that the man's death marked the end of a particular section of a particular chapter of Nigeria s modern history, we spent the next 15 minutes or so wondering how the Nigerian state or, more especially, the Federal Government of Nigeria, would react to the event. The reason for our apprehension was that although Ojukwu was granted state pardon, he never, to the best of our knowledge, categorically renounced, either verbally or in writing the act that created the need for pardon in the first place, namely, creating Biafra out of Nigeria and then leading the new nation in war against Nigeria.

For me, the implication of this, an implication which Ojukwu himself voiced in different ways at different times, is that if he again found himself in a situation like that of (1966 – 1970) he would again react as he did. And yet the man's acceptance of the sovereign authority of Nigerian state over him – at least from the time he came back from exile in 1982 until his death in November 2011 – was, to put it mildly, as strong as that of any other Nigerian. For me, it is this perfectly integrated duality that defines post-war Ojukwu; it is this duality that sustained his popularity among segments of Nigerian population; and it is to this duality that the Nigerian state and Nigerian

politicians have been responding since the man died. Komolafe and I agreed to await the Federal Government's reaction. And it came the next day.

Paying his tribute through his spokesperson, Reuben Abati, President Goodluck Jonathan said that "Chief Ojukwu lived a most fulfilled life, and has in his passing on, left behind a record in very notable contributions to the evolution of modern Nigeria which will assure his place on the history of the country". Then: "Chief Ojukwu's immense love for his people, justice, and equity and fairness which forced him into the leading role he played in the Nigerian Civil War, as well as his commitment to reconciliation and the full reintegration of his people into a united and progressive Nigeria in the aftermath of the war, will ensure that he is remembered forever as one of the great personalities of his time who stood out easily as a brave, courageous, fearless, erudite and charismatic leader."

Making allowance for the professional touch in the choice of words and language, if this statement, released by Reuben Abati, reasonably reflected the feeling of President Jonathan and his government and that of critical institutions of the Nigerian State, then it represents a demonstration of the three key propositions in this tribute; the duality proposition (embodied in the words "his people" and "Nigeria"), the *inevitability* proposition (embodied in the phrase "which forced him") and the *radical – and – integrity* proposition (which is reflected in his entire tribute). But the proof or validation of my propositions do not depend on official tributes.