

Research Article

## Biafra, the Ikemba and the Unfinished Business

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### Abstract

Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, a generational leader, left an irreplaceable legacy when he passed away on November 4, 2011. Following his death, debates emerged not only about who would fill the leadership void but also about his unfinished business. Theories also emerged, suggesting that this unfinished business included achieving Igbo presidency, regional autonomy, Biafra's restoration, or the publication of his promised account of the Biafran war. With the resurgence of Biafran separatism and rising insecurity in Southeast Nigeria, discussions about Ojukwu's unfinished business have intensified, especially within movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASOB). This study uses documentary research and hermeneutics to examine whether the restoration of Biafra truly represents Ojukwu's unfinished business, based on his life before, during, and after Biafra. The research finds that Ojukwu's life was primarily driven by the pursuit of freedom and justice. It argues that Ojukwu's unfinished business based on these primary drivers of his life is not an independent Biafran state, but a Nigeria where all citizens are treated equally and every region is allowed to develop according to its potential. The study therefore concludes that the various theories about Ojukwu's unfinished business are complementary, and working together to create a better Nigeria would honor his legacy.

### Keywords

The Ikemba, Ojukwu, Biafra, Nigeria, Unfinished Business

## 1. Introduction

When Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu passed away on 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2011, there was a lot of controversies and debates on his unfinished business. Many then believed that the late "Ezigbo Gburugburu" had an unfinished business. The great Ikemba himself had on many occasions spoken

about his unfinished business without specifying what exactly this was [1] Therefore, the question that troubled many immediately after Ojukwu's death, especially those interested in upholding the legacy of the great Ikemba by ensuring the realization of his unfinished business was, what is this unfin-

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ished business? Attempts to address this question then led to different theories and opinions.

Again in recent years, the resurgence in the agitation for the restoration of the sovereign state of Biafra and the insecurity it engendered in the Southeast has reignited the debate on Ojukwu's unfinished business; what implication such legacy has for Ndigbo and how it can be sustained. In this context, MASSOB, IPOB and other neo-Biafran movements view Ikemba as the initiator of an unfinished business: the Biafra project which for them needs to be realized by all means especially now that the marginalization of Ndigbo in Nigeria has become the norm.

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the different theories on Ojukwu's unfinished business with the intention of finding which of this theories is a correct representation of Ojukwu's life and actions and as well presents a better future for all Nigerians. The study is divided into four sections. The first section is the introduction which is already overtaken, the second section, that is, theories on the Ikemba's unfinished business explores the various theories and opinions of scholars and policymakers on the unfinished business. While the third section interrogates these theories using Ojukwu's life and actions, the fourth sections offers the most rationally compelling theory on Ojukwu's unfinished business. The fifth section is the conclusion, which offers summaries and recommendations on how Ojukwu's unfinished business can be pursued in the best interests of all Nigerians.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study due to its suitability for documentary data collection. This method enables the systematic gathering, examination, and interpretation of existing materials to draw rational inferences from available evidence. The use of documentary sources was appropriate given the study's reliance on qualitative data derived from secondary materials. Qualitative research entails a systematic examination of textual content to identify patterns and themes [2]. As Asika notes, it aims to describe, decode, and interpret meaning rather than quantify frequency [3]. Secondary data refers to information collected or authored by others, often from archival documents, books, or survey results. Tuckman highlights the advantages of secondary data, including cost-effectiveness and the ability to identify trends over time. Moreover, such data can be accessed without requiring participation from the subjects concerned [4].

This study specifically utilized secondary sources focused on Ojukwu's legacy—such as *Ojukwu: Tribute from Chinweizu*, *Ojukwu's Death: Reminder of Nigeria's Federalism Problem*, and *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafran Story*—as well as literature on current insecurity in Southeast Nigeria, including *In Defense of a Dialogical Resolution of the Biafran Crisis*, *Biafra and the Discourse on the Igbo Genocide*, *Corruption Complaints*, *Inequality and Ethnic Grievances in Post-Biafra Nigeria*, and *The Politics of 'Hope'*

and *'Despair': Generational Dimensions to Igbo Nationalism in Post-Civil War Nigeria*.

Data was analyzed using the hermeneutic method, which, according to Asika, involves dynamic interpretation of textual, contextual, verbal, and visual data. While similar to quantitative coding, hermeneutics generates codes inductively from the data during the research process. It seeks to uncover both manifest and latent meanings, identifying patterns and regularities through interpretive logic.

A key limitation of documentary research is the inability to validate secondary sources, especially when dealing with politically sensitive topics such as Ojukwu's legacy and Southeast Nigeria's insecurity. These sources may be biased or distorted. To address this, the hermeneutic method was employed to critically analyze and contextualize claims through intra- and inter-textual interpretation. This involved a three-stage validation process: assessing claims within their immediate context, within the broader argument of the source text, and across other relevant literature. While this method cannot eliminate all risks of misinformation, it enhances analytical rigor and offers a more reliable account of the historical and political realities under investigation.

## 3. Theories on the Ikemba's Unfinished Business

As pointed out above, the question, what specifically is Ojukwu's unfinished business has led to clash of ideas and division of opinions. This section examines these theories in turns.

### 3.1. Ojukwu's failed Account of the Civil War

To begin with, some see the unfinished business in the Ikemba's own account of the Nigerian civil war, which he was pressed and which he promised to put down in a book form but never fulfilled. Njoku & Kumolu observed in this regard that when in 1980, *Fourth Dimension Publishers* published General Alexander Madiebo's *The Biafran Revolution and the Nigerian Civil War*, many saw it as the most comprehensive account of what transpired, particularly on the defunct Biafran side, during the ill-fated civil war. After the publication of Madiebo's account of the 30-month civil war, many others have also ventured into writing books of the war, either to strengthen what he wrote or deny some of the accounts. Nevertheless:

Although we have a plethora of books written on the war, many Nigerians and indeed all lovers of history, had waited patiently for the man who called the shots on the Biafran side, Dim Chukwuemeka Odimegwu-Ojukwu, to write his own account of the war. The expectation was heightened when Ojukwu promised to write his war memoirs to be titled 'The Book.' The Book was expected to straighten the records and uncover the mysteries surrounding many events that took place on both the Biafran and Nigerian sides. His friend,

Frederick Forsyth had earlier in 1969, tried to put down an account of The Biafran Story but the book was a second hand material, not written directly by Ojukwu. Unfortunately the expectation of those who had waited anxiously for the 'Ezeigbo Gburugburu' to put down his war memoirs was dealt the tragic blow on Saturday, when Ojukwu bowed out of the scene. Many have dubbed the legend's inability to write The Book as one of his unfinished projects. But his close associates are quick to debunk the assertion [1].

### 3.2. Ojukwu: The Hero of Regional Confederation and Autonomy

The apostles of autonomy, confederation or regional government, see Ojukwu's unfinished business in confederation, which the Ikemba pushed for in Aburi but failed to actualize. Highlighting Ojukwu's effort to enthrone confederation in Nigeria, especially in Aburi, the publicly acclaimed scholar, Chinweizu in his acknowledgment of the great achievements of the Ikemba, recognized that the first of these great deeds was Ojukwu's brilliant performance in the negotiations at the Conference of Nigeria's military rulers that was held in Aburi, Ghana, in January 1967. According to Chinweizu, beginning as a minority of one in a Supreme Military Council (SMC) with eight other members in attendance, he prevailed on the SMC, first to renounce the use of force to resolve the crisis that had brought them to Aburi; and, secondly, to agree on a confederation arrangement for governing the country until a new constitution could be agreed. In this context, Chinweizu buttresses Ojukwu's achievements as follows:

Getting his colleagues to agree to the Aburi Accord was Ojukwu's seminal contribution to Nigeria's survival and to the security and progress of the entire population of Nigeria. However, the fruits of this fundamental contribution were not to be harvested. When the signatories returned to Nigeria, Gowon and his officials in Lagos refused to implement the terms of the Accord. This deepened the crisis and eventually provoked the secession of Eastern Nigeria and its quest for self-determination as the sovereign state of Biafra [5].

In this sense, Chinweizu sees returning Nigeria to the form of the confederation arrangement, which Ojukwu advocated for and which the SMC agreed on in Aburi as Ojukwu's unfinished business. He also believed that Ojukwu at his death has successfully handed this business to his younger colleagues in the Pro-National Conference Organization (PRONACO):

No person dies or leaves office without leaving behind some unfinished business. Hero that he was, Ojukwu is no exception. There is the business of transforming Nigeria, a project which is being ably carried on by his younger Pro-PRONACO colleagues.

Chinweizu in this context enumerated the various efforts made by Ojukwu and his colleagues in PRONACO to dismantle what he considered the 1999 fraudulent constitution. Ojukwu was among the leaders of thought who, in 2005-2006,

in consultation with Chief Anthony Enahoro, initiated the Peoples' National Conference through the platform of the Pro-PRONACO –an alliance of 164 ethnic organizations that believed that a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) had become imperative for transforming Nigeria and ending its people's woes.

That People's National Conference, which was a comprehensive revalidation of the Aburi Accord by the ethnic nationalities, produced a Draft People's Constitution which has been overwhelmingly endorsed across Nigeria as a credible path to a sustainable basis for Nigeria's survival. As the conference rotated its sittings across various geo-political locations (including Lagos, Port Harcourt, Enugu, Jos and Kano) Ojukwu hosted that conference twice in Enugu, in February and in March 2006. Upon the conclusion of the conference, Ojukwu actively mobilized for the informal referendum to which the Draft People's Constitution was subjected, resulting in its endorsement by various ethnic blocs.

As a part of the process for actualizing this written wish of the peoples of Nigeria, Ojukwu volunteered to be one of the plaintiffs, alongside Wole Soyinka, Anthony Enahoro and Bankole Oki, in a lawsuit before the Federal High Court, Lagos, challenging the legitimacy of the 1999 constitution. This is Suit No. FHC/L/CS/558/09. It is still in court till today. The suit is to dismantle the fraudulent and military-imposed constitution of 1999 and make space for a new order.

The current president of Nigeria, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, then as the national leader of the Action Congress (AC), belonged to this group that saw restructuring Nigeria into a confederation as Ojukwu's unfinished business. In a condolence message released after Ojukwu's demise, Tinubu described the death to have "marked the passage of one of the movers of Nigerian history in the 20th century. On what this death means for Nigeria, Tinubu insisted that:

Ojukwu's death once again reminds all of us of the unfinished business of Nigerian federalism. If only for his memory, and to ensure that Nigeria never has to suffer again any crisis like the Civil War, we must all rise as a people to fix Nigeria's special challenges. That is why, Nigeria must, as a matter of urgency convoke a sovereign national conference, where all these issues would be resolved.

Tinubu is the president of Nigeria today and one wonders how much he still believes and is willing to act on this statement he made 14 years ago? Whatever be the case, what is of interest here is that President Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu once held the view that Ojukwu's unfinished business is devolving Nigeria into a confederal system. This is why he also added:

...that federal-related tensions still persisted 31 years after the Civil War (1967-1970), underlined the depth of the feeling of marginalization and perceived unfairness by critical stakeholders in the Nigerian union [6].

### 3.3. Ojukwu and the Quest for Igbo Presidency

Still, there are others who considered the actualization of Igbo presidency the unfinished business of the Great Ikemba. The argument usually is that this was why the Ikemba reentered mainstream Nigerian politics when he returned from exile and even vied for the top Nigerian political job on several occasions. According to one author, alleviating the condition of Ndigbo within Nigeria became his mission until his death in 2011. To do that he joined the NPN, the governing party of that time, and contested for a seat in the Nigerian senate. However, after a vigorous election campaign, he was declared defeated. Undaunted, he continued to be a voice for Ndigbo in Nigerian affairs despite a stint as a political detainee during the Buhari period. In 1994-1995, at the Abacha Constitutional Conference in Abuja, the Ndigbo contingent, led jointly by Ojukwu and a former Vice President of Nigeria, Dr Alex Ekwueme, introduced and persuaded the Conference to adopt the concept of six geo-political zones in which the 36 states of Nigeria are now aggregated. In 2003, Ojukwu joined the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) and became its Presidential candidate in the 2003 and 2007 elections. This was all in a further effort to give Ndigbo a suitable presence in Nigerian politics and to promote the interests of Ndigbo within Nigeria [5].

### 3.4. Ojukwu and the Sovereign State of Biafra

In recent years, the resurgence in the agitation for the restoration of the sovereign state of Biafra and the insecurity it created in the Southeast has reignited the debate on Ojukwu's unfinished business. In this context, MASSOB, IPOB and other neo-Biafran movements view Ikemba as the initiator of an unfinished business: the Biafra project which for them is in urgent need of completion now that the marginalization of Ndi in Nigeria has intensified. This feeling by neo-Biafran and Igbo nationalists is captured by Thomas & Falola, who contend that:

Igbos' perception of ethnic marginalization and collective victimization in the Nigerian state - from the lack of Igbo presidency following the end of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) - breeds not just a 'siege mentality amongst them but also fuels narratives of disillusionment that, in turn, portend ethnic separatism as the zenith of Igbo nationalism and as the symbolic marker of 'authentic' Igbo identity in Southeast Nigeria. And, in large part because Igbos typically regard themselves - and are regarded by others - as a 'community of suffering' owing to bitter memories of the fratricidal - or, as some would argue, 'genocidal') - war, Biafran secessionism serves as a potent 'instrument of political bargaining 'in Igbos' quest to extricate themselves from what they tenaciously underscore as the longstanding domination of the political system by three other ethnic groups - that is, the Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba - and the concomitant relative marginalization of Ndigbo (Igbo people) in the Nigerian state [7].

In his ethnography conducted in south eastern Nigeria, for

instance, the American anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith brilliantly highlights the preponderance of perceptions of relative marginalization amongst Igbos and how this particular way of interpreting the condition of Igbos in post-war Nigeria feeds into separatist agitations and armed insurgency:

Ever since Igbos lost their bid for independence in 1970, the prevailing popular political discourse in southeastern Nigeria has been that of marginalization. In columns by Igbo writers in newspapers and magazines, in letters to editors, in comments made to call-in programmes on local radio and television stations and, most of all, in everyday conversations, the Igbo preoccupation with their marginalization in post-war Nigeria has been profound. Igbo complaints about their marginal status take many forms, including claims that federal government resources are channeled disproportionately to other regions, that rules for appointments to civil service positions are deliberately weighted against Igbos, and that official information and state data collection exercises such as census-taking are purposely designed to undercount Igbos and thwart their rightful share of political representation and government revenues [8].

Coming from this background, Smith draws the conclusion that any leader from the Southeast who presents himself as defending the cause of the Igbo in the Nigerian federation is automatically seen and made a hero by the people. He recalls witnessing an instance which unimpeachably illustrates this interpretation. During the course of his research, in the cool of one evening, he was in a bar where locals come to drink. In a separate table not very far from the table he was sitting, a group of young Igbos were talking about Biafra and the marginalization of the Igbo. He noticed one particular young man in his 20s who seem to know a lot about the topic of discussion and was very vocal in the ongoing discussion. Every attention was on him and he was telling the people how Biafra was going to be actualized in a matter of months. Smith could hear what they were saying because the discussion was in English and his table was not far from theirs. He noticed men after men joining the group. Each person that joined ordered drink for the young man, an indication of how thrilled and overjoyed his listeners were with his prediction or prophecy of the eminence of Biafra. There and then, Smith realized what Biafra means for an average Igbo man and concluded that sooner than later, this type of discussion would degenerate into some sort of militancy that would be difficult for the Nigerian government to handle. In this context, Smith did not only consider Biafra an unfinished business for Ojukwu but for Nigeria as a nation.

In the same vein, Onuoha, examined the ongoing insecurity in the Southeast from the perspective of Igbo or Biafran nationalism which according to him is caused by the collective sense of marginalization felt by the people of the zone. In this context, Onuoha underscored what he called "the harsh material conditions—the scarce economic opportunities coupled with massive unemployment—of young Igbos that engender resurgent separatist agitations in postwar Nigeria." It is

therefore his contention that the insecurity is a problem that carrying guns alone cannot solve. It requires massive economic development in the zone which in his word will give the people a sense of belonging and convince them that they are still a part of Nigeria [9].

To buttress this point, Nwangwu et al divided Igbo nationalists into two groups: the first generation that emerged in 1970 and is orchestrated by elite organizations such as the *Ohanaeze Ndigbo* and *Aka Ikenga* that are generally anti-separatism and seek the participation of Igbos in mainstream Nigerian politics; and the second generation that surged since 1999 and is made up of radical separatist organizations such as Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). For Nwangwu et al, the second generation of Igbo nationalists—those who long for the defunct secessionist state of Biafra to be restored—is a collaboration between the Igbo petty bourgeoisie and the underclass with the latter constituting a huge fraction of such ethno-nationalist movements in southeast Nigeria. Precisely in consequence of the Igbo underclass—typically the poor Igbos such as ‘artisans, traders, commercial motorcyclists, commercial tricycle (“keke”) riders, taxi drivers, the unemployed and under-employed graduates’—dominating the ethno-nationalist movements in support of the restoration of Biafra, the authors conclude that:

The current agitation for the state of Biafra by the youth is, to an extent, an expression of resentment over their material conditions. Although such conditions generally reflect the broader contradictions of the Nigerian political economy, they are often understood as ethnic bias and exclusion [10].

Korieh, also linked Ojukwu’s unfinished business to the Biafran cause which according to him is inspired by both the apparent and real sense of marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria. Anchoring his argument on the civil war, he maintains that the manner in which the gruesome civil conflict is been remembered by the Nigerian state tends to marginalize the perspectives of Igbos who experienced it which, in turn, breeds memories and narratives of exclusion and marginalization amongst second-generation Igbos. Thus, Korieh argues that what is being experienced currently in Southeast Nigeria goes beyond what bullets and guns can solve to the need for an appropriate way of reintegrating the Igbos in a post-war Nigeria [11].

This position was shares by Nkwopara, who used Uwazuruike, the founder of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) as a classical example of the frustration of an average Igbo person within Nigeria and an eternal longing for the restoration of Biafra. He argues that Uwazuruike founded MASSOB in 1999 to contest what he saw as the continued marginalization of the Igbo despite the euphoria of democratic transition and to promote the interests of Igbo-speaking people in Nigeria. Prior to founding MASSOB, Uwazuruike was a member of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP): he had supported Olusegun

Obasanjo’s presidential campaign but became disillusioned with Obasanjo’s policies vis-à-vis political appointments along ethnic lines. For him:

When making federal appointments, the Yoruba president, Olusegun Obasanjo had not given the Igbo consideration, even though 70% of Igbo had voted for him. Obasanjo thus continued the marginalization of the Igbo’ [12].

Uwazuruike believed that political elites representing the interests of the other ethnic groups—the Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba—will never give Igbos the opportunity to hold significant political positions or to ascend to the presidency in the foreseeable future in democratic Nigeria. This sentiment as to the persistent marginalization of Igbos was underlined by Uwazuruike clarified the rationale behind his founding of MASSOB:

In 1999, when I floated MASSOB in Lagos, I took into consideration the travails of Ndigbo in Nigeria, so many years after the civil war. I took into consideration the Aburi Accord that was not implemented. I also took into consideration the 3R, reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation, that was jettisoned by the Federal Government of Nigeria ... I came to the conclusion that Ndigbo are no longer wanted in Nigeria. Many of my people saw reasons with me and joined in the cause. And with continued and unabated humiliation of Ndigbo in Nigeria, many more continued to join wherever they found themselves [12].

It is therefore Nkwopara’s contention that the insecurity in the Southeast is a multifaceted problem that cannot be solve by guns alone.

What is clear from the theories and opinions reviewed above is that there is an active debate on the Ikemba’s unfinished business within which different scholars and policy-makers have taken different positions including the claims that the Ikemba was an advocate of confederal system of government, a proponent of the division of Nigeria and that his unfinished business consist in these and in his failure to write his own account of the Nigerian civil war after promising to do so. Nevertheless, what is missing in each of these accounts is the failure of their proponents to look critically into Ojukwu’s life to find out how their claim is supported by qualities that drove his actions because it is in these drivers that we can find those things that were important for Ojukwu and therefore his unfinished business. This is very important because for any position presented as Ojukwu’s unfinished business, to be authentic must be consistent with those qualities that defined his life. To make up for this deficiency in theories on Ojukwu’s unfinished business is the inspiration behind the present study.

#### 4. Looking at the Unfinished Business from Events in Ojukwu’s Life

Although, like all mortals, the Ikemba periodically experienced confusion in search of his mission to Nigeria and to

Ndigbo whom he loved with passion, this study believes that a close examination of certain events in his life will lead to the discovery of some fundamental qualities which will in turn lead to his unfinished business. The belief is that this will help the millions of Nigerians especially Igbo youth who seek the immortalization of Ojukwu to know where to channel their energy and efforts to.

#### 4.1. Ojukwu the War Lord

The Ojukwu most of us know is “Ojukwu the Biafra war lord.” For many and perhaps rightly so, the unfinished business of this Ojukwu is the Biafra project. However, while it is true that Ojukwu is generally associated with Biafra, those who know the story well know that Biafra is not Ojukwu’s brain child. It was a situation forced on him by a combination of factors including the unprecedented killing of the Igbos before and during the civil war [13]. Therefore, “Ojukwu the war lord” was only reacting to emergencies and thus might not have presented the necessary enduring qualities that will allow us to judge him and hence decipher his true mission to humanity. But “Ojukwu the war lord” is not the only Ojukwu there is, there is also “Ojukwu before Biafra.” It is precisely in that Ojukwu, uncorrupted by the influence of the civil war, that we can find the true Ojukwu and his unfinished business.

#### 4.2. Ojukwu Before Biafra

The intention here is not to repeat what is already known about Ojukwu but rather, to examine certain events initiated by him, look at the motives behind those events and interpret them in the light of subsequent events. We choose for our consideration here four different events almost always presented by Ojukwu scholars as the defining events in his life:

- 1) In 1944, Ojukwu was briefly imprisoned for assaulting a white British colonial teacher who was humiliating a black woman at King’s College Lagos.
- 2) Ojukwu’s enormously wealthy father wanted him to read Law on admission to Oxford, but Ojukwu was fascinated with modern History. He studied Law for a year and followed his heart.
- 3) When he returned Nigeria in 1956, he opted for the civil service. In 1957, in spite of his academic qualification and family background, he joined the Nigerian Army as a recruit.
- 4) After the counter-coup by northern officers in 1966 upon which Ironsi and his host Fajuyi were killed in Ibadan, Ojukwu insisted that the military hierarchy must be preserved in which Brig Ogundipe should take over leadership. However, the leadership of the coup insisted that Colonel Gowon be made head of state. Ogundipe was shipped off to London as Nigeria’s High Commissioner [14].

Detailed analysis of these events is beyond the scope of this

study. We shall only draw conclusions derivable from them. One of the events will help to explode some of the misunderstandings about Ikemba’s role in Biafra.

### 5. A Hermeneutics of the Ojukwu before Biafra

There are two categories of heroes: those born heroes and those who achieve heroism. Those born heroes possess inborn heroic qualities, so that they become heroes irrespective of where and when they find themselves. While those who achieve heroism become heroes by taking advantage of heroic circumstances. Ikemba falls within the first category. He is a hero not because of the role he played in Biafra but because of his inborn heroic qualities. He was going to be a hero with or without Biafra. One of these qualities comes out in the second events listed above. By leaving Law (which was his father’s idea) for History, the Ikemba demonstrated an unusual strong will and desire for personal independence; a deep-rooted quest to be true to himself. It is this quest that would eventually define him and punctuated every other thing he did in life.

This point is further corroborated by the third event. When Ojukwu joined the army as a recruit, he was a first class master degree holder from the prestigious Oxford University. His father was indisputably the richest man in Nigeria. What then was the highly educated Ojukwu doing in the army? A lot of interpretations have been proposed to explain this but history seems very clear that in opting for the military, Ojukwu wanted an institution where his father’s enormous influence would be non-existent or at least minimal. Initially, when he wanted to join the military and his father got a wind of it, history has it that the old man blackballed him. Specifically, the older Ojukwu agreed with his good friend, the Governor-General of Nigeria (John Macpherson) that the younger Ojukwu should not be allowed to join the military but if he insisted in joining, he would be forced to join as a recruit or non-commission officer (NCO). His father knowing his son as a proud person had assumed that he would either refuse to enlist as a recruit or would be forced to leave when exposed to the difficulties of the recruit’s life. Thus, according to Forsyth:

Ojukwu joined the military initially enlisting as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) in Zaria. Ojukwu’s decision to enlist as a NCO was forced by his father (Sir Louis)’s pulling of political strings with the then Governor-General of Nigeria (John Macpherson) to prevent Emeka from getting an officer-cadetship. Sir Louis and Governor-General Macpherson believed Emeka would not stick to the grueling NCO schedule, however, Emeka persevered. After an incident in which Ojukwu corrected a drill sergeant’s mispronunciation of the safety catch of the Lee-Enfield.303 rifle, the British Depot Commander recommended Emeka for an officer’s commission.

Basically, therefore, Ojukwu went into the military to be a

man of his own. Bola Tinubu statement published by Daily Post cited above succinctly underscored this particular point:

The late Biafran war leader was a revolutionary, almost from the womb. While his father, the rich and the illustrious Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu insisted his son should go into the civil services as was fit for an Oxford graduate in history that his son was, the young man had other ideas. He opted for military service, even offering to join as a recruit, when his way was blocked. That decision, not only made him the first graduate to enlist in the Nigerian Army, it also changed the course of Nigerian history [15].

Tinubu also observed that although “Chief Odumegwu-Ojukwu was a controversial figure, he made his mark during the era of the titans of Nigerian politics and governance.” According to him:

Ojukwu, the Ikemba and Eze Igbo Gburugburu, meant many things to many people. But his greatness was that he stood his own ground such that, even with the constellation of stars of his age and time, he still made his mark – and profoundly so. You might love Ojukwu and you might hate him. But you could never be indifferent about him nor could you ignore him [6].

We now return to the first event to look at this quality in more details. In 1944, when he was 11, Ojukwu was briefly imprisoned for assaulting a white British colonial teacher who was humiliating a black woman at King’s College in Lagos, an event which generated widespread coverage in local newspapers. For a schoolboy to fight a teacher is unusual, and requires great courage. For any black person in a colonial society ruled by all-powerful whites, a society which practices racial discrimination, such behavior required extreme provocation or extreme folly. For an 11 years old black schoolboy in such a society to fight a teacher belonging to the master race required extraordinary audacity. Here is how Chinweizu captured this event of enormous historical significance:

And for him to do so in defense of another black person, and not of himself, showed a precocious race consciousness and a meritorious sense of racial solidarity. Marcus Garvey would have been proud of the lad and recognized him as one destined to do great deeds for the black race. Here was a boy to watch. And, when he grew up, Ojukwu did not disappoint such expectations [5].

Another key points to be considered here is that the woman in question was not Ojukwu’s mother or sister that one could appeal to filial passion. Here again the Ikemba was driven by something inborn, which the Asiwaju hinted at above. He was driven by that heroic part of him that would always move him to action whenever injustice is done. It would later lead him into confrontation with Nigeria. The fourth event make this point clearer: when Ironsi and Fajuyi were killed in Ibadan, Ikemba did not covet the presidency. He did not call for reprisal against the North, which was done by northern leaders when the Saduana of was killed in the first coup. He simply asked for justice to be done. It was the refusal of the Federal Military Government to do this that eventually snowballed

into the civil war.

As earlier hinted this particular event explodes the idea that Ojukwu waged the civil war to secure the domination of the Igbo and to carve out for himself a political enclave where he would reign supreme. Unfortunately, Zik the foremost Igbo in his pursuit of Pan-Nigerianism subscribed to this view when he denied the Biafra pogrom and instead accused Ojukwu’s ambition as being responsible for the civil war [16]. One wonders the amount of pressure that was brought to bear on Zik by the British that led him to deny what was a verifiable fact of history. Be that as it may, it was the Great Zik himself who said that history will continue to vindicate the just. History has already started to vindicate Ojukwu and the role he played in the civil war.

Additionally, those managing this opinion need to be reminded that before the civil war, Ojukwu was more Hausa and Yoruba than Igbo. He was born in Zenguru, present day Niger State, educated first in King’s college Lagos, and as a young man spoke Hausa and Yoruba fluently not Igbo. Also, he opted to work in the North but for the rule then that demanded graduates to work in their state of origin [14]. It was while working in the Eastern Region already as an adult that he learned Igbo. Thus, it will not be out of place to argue that culturally, Ojukwu was a second class Igbo. It is fairer then to say that Ojukwu did not fight to affect Igbo domination or to actualize any political ambition. He did not even fight because of his love for Ndi Igbo as is generally assumed. Why then did he fight?

## 6. Ojukwu’s Unfinished Business

Ojukwu lived and died for two things: the pursuit of personal independent and the demand for justice. These are his unfinished business. They are the projects he initiated and should be continued by his spiritual sons and daughters. Like the Apostle Paul, the Ikemba taught us in his life that God created us free; to make our personal choices in freedom without intimidations. He resisted injustice in all of its forms. For this he became a rebel, disowned by his father, rejected by friends and exiled by his country. But he did not give up. He fought until his last breath.

Thus, Ojukwu did not stand against the unjust federal aggression because Ndigbo were involved or because he loved them more than other tribes in Nigeria. He stood up because Ndigbo were been killed in the north without the opportunity to defend themselves. He stood up for Ndigbo because they were and still are been treated as second class citizens in a land they call their own. Buttressing this point, Asiwaju Tinubu said that:

the Biafran episode, the civil war and Ojukwu’s role in the Second Republic when, fresh from exile he dived head-long into the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) to contest a senatorial seat, which he eventually lost, was still a subject of historical analysis. So, is his controversial stand on the June 12 question, when the late Ikemba campaigned against the

mandate of Basorun MKO Abiola, when it was annulled by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida [6].

But in spite of this, Tinubu in his opinion insisted that all these actions were not driven by any personal motives, but the need to give the Igbo fair representation in the Nigerian commonwealth:

The Civil War was unfortunate. Ojukwu was one of the young men at the helms who took one decision or the other that led to the unfortunate war. But whatever the circumstances were, I don't think Ojukwu's actions were driven by personal motives. It would appear to me they were driven by efforts to give the Ndigbo fair representation in a federal Nigeria [6].

The point therefore is that the Ikemba would have willingly defended the Hausa, the Yoruba or any other tribe in Nigeria were he to find them in a similar condition that he found Ndigbo. For him, where one comes from does not matter, what matters are the respect for personal autonomy and justice. This is the true Ikemba, not the Biafra war lord, the darling of the Igbo, a rebel for the Yoruba and an archenemy of the north, but the authentic Ikemba who epitomizes this Jean Jacques Rousseau statement, "I do not approve of what you say, but I will die fighting for your right to say it."

## 7. Conclusion

The death of Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu in 2011 catalyzed renewed efforts to immortalize his legacy by identifying and advancing what many perceive as his "unfinished business." In the immediate aftermath, several symbolic and institutional gestures were undertaken—most notably, the renaming of the former Anambra State University to Odumegwu Ojukwu University. These initiatives aimed to enshrine his memory within both cultural and political consciousness. However, the resurgence of Biafran separatist agitation and the intensifying insecurity in Southeastern Nigeria have reignited public and academic discourse surrounding the true essence of Ojukwu's legacy. At present, this debate revolves around four major interpretations of Ojukwu's unfinished mission: (1) the realization of an Igbo presidency, (2) the attainment of regional autonomy, (3) the restoration of Biafra, and (4) the publication of Ojukwu's promised account of the Biafran war. These competing frameworks are currently shaping public opinion, political rhetoric, and scholarly inquiry, drawing participation from policymakers, ideological and secessionist groups, and ordinary citizens alike.

This study employs a hermeneutic approach to critically evaluate these theories by situating Ojukwu's pre-Biafra life as a neutral interpretive framework. Through this lens, it identifies two core values—freedom and justice—as the enduring themes that defined Ojukwu's actions and public life. The study argues that prevailing interpretations, which predominantly focus on Ojukwu's wartime and post-war actions, risk misrepresenting his legacy by emphasizing reactionary

responses to historical emergencies rather than the foundational principles that shaped his leadership and identity.

However, the critique of these theories does not render them incompatible with the aim of preserving Ojukwu's legacy. On the contrary, the study contends that each position—despite its limitations—contributes meaningfully to a broader, dual legacy: Ojukwu's lifelong commitment to justice and to the liberation of marginalized peoples. For example, proponents of regional autonomy draw inspiration from his vision of a federal Nigeria where constituent regions exercise meaningful self-determination. Advocates for an Igbo presidency interpret his insistence on political inclusion as support for equitable representation. Similarly, movements such as IPOB and MASSOB derive legitimacy from Ojukwu's resistance to systemic marginalization, even as the study underscores that Biafra, for Ojukwu, was a means to an end—not an unqualified or non-negotiable goal. Ojukwu's unwavering commitment was to a Nigeria in which the Igbo, like all other groups, are treated with dignity, justice, and equality. This crucial distinction suggests that current ideological divisions among these groups are counterproductive. Rather than operating as adversaries, advocates of each position should recognize their shared intellectual and moral lineage. If they indeed draw inspiration from Ojukwu's legacy, then collaboration—rather than conflict—is imperative.

In conclusion, despite prevailing tensions in the Southeast and the adversarial relationship between secessionist groups and the Nigerian state, it remains possible to construct a lasting and unifying legacy for Ojukwu. This requires reframing his legacy not through the lens of factional aspirations but through his overarching ideals of justice and freedom—values that have the potential to unify, rather than divide, Nigerians.

## Abbreviations

|         |                                                                 |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| AC      | Action Congress                                                 |
| IPOB    | Indigenous People of Biafra                                     |
| MASOB   | Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra |
| NPN     | National Party of Nigeria                                       |
| NCO     | Non-commissioned Officer                                        |
| SMC     | Supreme Military Council                                        |
| PRONACO | Pro-National Conference Organization                            |
| SNC     | Sovereign National Conference                                   |

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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