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### Article

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## A HERMENEUTICS ON THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF CHUKWUEMEKA ODUMEGWU OJUKWU IN RELATION TO CORRUPT PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

In an age where political power often felt divorced from moral responsibility, Nigeria's struggle with systemic corruption calls for a return to foundational values that once inspired resistance, sacrifice, and public accountability. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, though best known as the Biafran wartime leader, carried a political philosophy rooted in honour, ethical leadership, and duty to nation. Yet, in the decades since his passing, his name has been widely celebrated but superficially understood. This raises a critical question: how can Ojukwu's political thought be meaningfully interpreted and applied to confront the enduring crisis of corruption in Nigeria? Adopting a hermeneutical method, the findings indicates that the core values embedded in Ojukwu's thought - particularly the notions of public sacrifice, truth-telling, and principled resistance - are not relics of the past, but urgent tools for evaluating and reforming present-day governance. However, his legacy is increasingly misappropriated, reduced to symbolic gestures devoid of substance, while the ethical challenges he once confronted have deepened. The study concludes that Nigeria's crisis is not merely one of political structure, but of moral vision. It recommended a critical re-engagement with Ojukwu's political philosophy, particularly in civic education, leadership development, and institutional accountability. Only by restoring integrity as the centrepiece of public life can Nigeria begin to escape the cycle of corruption and betrayal that continues to undermine its democratic future.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Politics, Corruption Practices, and Public Service.

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## **Introduction**

The Nigerian political landscape has, for decades, been riddled with the entrenchment of corrupt practices that undermine national development, weaken state institutions that erode public trust in leadership. From post-independence instability to contemporary democratic challenges, the scourge of corruption has not only persisted but evolved, adapting itself to different political regimes and socio-economic climates. In the midst of this complex history, certain political figures have emerged whose ideologies and rhetoric sought to confront, redefine, or resist the prevailing norms of mis-governance. One such figure is Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu—a man whose life was marked by intellectual vigour, political conviction, and a deep sense of moral duty to the Nigerian people. Ojukwu's political thought, often viewed through the prism of the Biafran struggle, extends beyond secessionist agitation or military exploits. His speeches, writings, and public engagements reflect a sustained critique of the Nigerian state's moral decay and the systematic betrayal of national ideals by those entrusted with power. He believed in justice, meritocracy, accountability, and the supremacy of the people's will—values that stand in stark contrast to the culture of impunity and corruption that has plagued Nigerian politics. A hermeneutical study of Ojukwu's thought allows for a nuanced interpretation that moves beyond literal accounts or ideological dogma. Instead, it demands that we situate his political expressions within their historical, cultural, and existential contexts, and interpret them as responses to the deep structural malaise within the Nigerian state. Hermeneutics, in this context, is not merely a method of textual interpretation but a philosophical engagement with meaning—an attempt to understand how Ojukwu saw the nation, its wounds, and its possibilities for healing.

This article argues that Ojukwu's political ideas—though often overshadowed by the politics of war and ethnicity—contain profound insights into the ethical failures of Nigeria's political class. By interrogating his views on leadership, federalism, nationalism, and justice, one begins to uncover a political philosophy that is both radically Nigerian and persistently anti-corruption. His critique was not just about bad leadership; it was about the moral deficit that permits corruption to flourish at every level of governance. The relevance of Ojukwu's political thought is more urgent than ever in today's Nigeria, where successive administrations continue to grapple with the same challenges of embezzlement, nepotism, and electoral manipulation. In revisiting his thought, we are invited not only to remember a controversial and often misunderstood statesman but to reflect on how philosophical clarity and moral courage can inspire a more ethical political culture. This inquiry does not claim that Ojukwu had all the answers; rather, it seeks to illuminate how his convictions, when viewed, applying hermeneutical method, through a philosophical lens, offers a framework for rethinking the relationship between politics and corruption in Nigeria.

## **The Concept of Hermeneutics and Hermeneutical Method**

Hermeneutical method is an interpretive method that recognises the dynamic interplay between text, context, and the lived experience of both the author and the reader. Hermeneutics, traditionally associated with the interpretation of sacred or classical texts, has evolved into a powerful philosophical tool for unearthing meaning from historical and political narratives. It is not merely about retrieving the intentions of the speaker or writer; rather, it is about engaging with their words in such a way that they continue to speak meaningfully into the present. In the case of Ojukwu, his speeches, interviews, memoirs, and actions must be read not as frozen historical relics but as living commentaries on the

challenges that continue to define Nigerian society today. Hermeneutics begins with a recognition of the gap between the past and the present. Yet, rather than viewing this gap as a barrier, it becomes a bridge—a space where dialogue can occur. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a central figure in philosophical hermeneutics, emphasized the concept of the “fusion of horizons,” where the interpreter’s current reality meets the historical reality of the text. This approach allows us to bring Ojukwu’s political vision into conversation with today’s Nigeria, a country still mired in the same structural dysfunctions he denounced decades ago. What emerges from such a dialogue is not mere nostalgia but a renewed awareness of the enduring relevance of his critiques.

### **Interpreting Political Legacy of Ojukwu in Contemporary Era**

Applying philosophical method of hermeneutics to the political legacy of Ojukwu, also involves acknowledging that meaning is not static. The significance of Ojukwu’s political thought may not lie solely in what he said at a given time but in how his ideas resonate differently under contemporary conditions. For instance, his consistent advocacy for merit-based leadership and federal equity takes on new urgency in today’s Nigeria, where debates about restructuring, decentralisation, and anti-corruption continue to dominate national discourse. The question then remains, how might Ojukwu’s vision challenge the complacency of current political actors? In what ways can his belief in moral leadership serve as a counter-narrative to the politics of expediency and self-enrichment? Moreover, hermeneutic interpretation demands attentiveness to silence and subtext. Not every critique is loud, and not every truth is found in slogans. Ojukwu’s reflections on governance were often laced with philosophical undertones (encapsulated in branches of philosophy such as ethics and critical thinking/logic)<sup>1</sup>—subtle meditations on justice, human dignity, and the moral obligations of the state. Reading these expressions hermeneutically requires sensitivity to both what is said and what is implied. It compels us to look beyond the spectacle of war and ethnicity that has often clouded his legacy, and instead see a thinker deeply troubled by the ethical collapse of the Nigerian state. By employing hermeneutics as a method, this article does not aim to idolise Ojukwu or offer a one-dimensional portrayal of his political journey. Rather, it seeks to recover the moral and intellectual resources within his thought that can illuminate present challenges. In doing so, it opens up a space for critical reflection on how political legacies are understood—not as static monuments to the past but as evolving dialogues that must be reinterpreted in the light of contemporary struggles. Through this lens, Ojukwu becomes more than a historical figure; he becomes a philosophical interlocutor in the ongoing conversation about justice, leadership, and the moral purpose of politics in Nigeria.

### **Ojukwu’s Vision of Leadership as Honour, Sacrifice, and National Duty**

At the heart of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu’s political thought lies a profound and unwavering vision of leadership—one rooted in honour, sacrifice, and an uncompromising sense of national duty. Unlike many of his contemporaries who treated political power as a means for personal gain or ethnic dominance, Ojukwu approached leadership as a sacred responsibility. His conception of leadership was not transactional but transformative; not self-serving, but self-emptying.<sup>2</sup> In his words and actions, there was always a moral undertone—a constant appeal to conscience, history, and collective dignity. Ojukwu’s understanding of honour was deeply embedded in the traditional Igbo worldview where the reputation of the individual was intrinsically tied to their integrity and service to the community. Honour, for him, was not a superficial title or a military badge. It was the

outcome of living truthfully, defending the weak, and being courageous in the face of moral decay. As a leader, Ojukwu held himself to high standards, often refusing to bend to political convenience. Even when misunderstood or vilified, he chose the harder path if it aligned with what he believed to be right. His decision to lead Biafra, though heavily debated, was, in his own interpretation, an act of honour-to protect a people he believed were under existential threat.

Closely tied to this notion of honour was the concept of sacrifice. Ojukwu did not romanticise war or suffering, but he did believe that true leadership sometimes required personal loss for the greater good. He gave up wealth, comfort, and global opportunities in order to stand with a marginalised people. His life after Biafra-marked by exile, public suspicion, and political isolation-was evidence of a man who bore the costs of leadership long after the applause had faded. In an era where many Nigerian leaders cling to power for material gain, Ojukwu's model invites reflection: What are leaders willing to give up? Who bears the burden of their ambition? Finally, Ojukwu consistently framed leadership as a national duty. He saw the Nigerian project not as a fixed identity but as a task-an unfinished moral assignment that required ethical stewardship, not tribal dominance. His criticisms of successive Nigerian governments were often grounded in their failure to act as custodians of a just and equitable society. For Ojukwu, the measure of leadership was not in how loudly one spoke about unity, but in how responsibly one managed the diversity of the Nigerian experience. His call for federal equity, regional development, and sincere dialogue was a call for leaders to rise above ethnic loyalties and act as guardians of a collective destiny. In many ways, Ojukwu's vision of leadership stands in tension with the prevailing political ethos in Nigeria, where impunity, corruption, and the manipulation of public office have become deeply institutionalized. Yet, it is precisely this contrast that makes his thought valuable. His life and ideals remind us that leadership is not just a matter of occupying office; it is a moral vocation. As Nigeria continues to grapple with crises of governance and national identity, revisiting Ojukwu's vision offers more than historical insight-It challenges us to redefine what it truly means to lead.

### **The Ethical Core of Resistance: Ojukwu's Stance on Integrity and Public Service**

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's political philosophy was anchored in a deep sense of ethical responsibility, particularly in relation to integrity and public service. According to Nweke and Nwoye, public service in Nigeria is an apology of what it should be.<sup>3</sup> His resistance to injustice and bad governance was not simply a reaction to political events but a principled stand rooted in a moral vision of leadership. For Ojukwu, politics was not a career to be exploited but a duty to serve. He consistently spoke out against corruption, nepotism, and the betrayal of national values, viewing them as symptoms of a deeper moral crisis within the Nigerian political system. Ojukwu believed that leadership required a strong ethical compass. He often stressed that a leader's first obligation was to the truth, and that public office must be driven by service, not personal gain. This idea of Ojukwu resonates in the thoughts of Nweke and Nwoye, when proffering the right higher institutions' educational ethos, argue that such educational import should be: "to socialize the Nigerian students to cultivate acceptable behaviours, attitudes, patriotism, nationalism and value the status of the constitution as well as create the awareness in students about the roles and obligations of Government at all levels."<sup>4</sup>

This ethical stance became most visible during the Nigerian Civil War, where his decisions, though controversial, were framed by a belief in protecting the dignity and rights

of the people he led. He was not blind to the costs of his choices, but he believed that silence in the face of injustice was a greater sin.<sup>5</sup> His critique of the Nigerian state was always underlined by a concern for the erosion of public morality. He lamented the way political office had become synonymous with personal enrichment, and how loyalty to the nation had been replaced by loyalty to self-interest. For Ojukwu, the antidote to corruption was not just better laws but a renewal of ethical leadership-leaders who saw themselves as stewards of the people's trust. In today's Nigeria, where many continue to see public office as an avenue for accumulation rather than service, Ojukwu's ethical vision remains strikingly relevant. His emphasis on integrity and moral courage offers a compelling contrast to the prevailing culture of impunity. By returning to the ethical foundations of his thought, we are reminded that genuine resistance to corruption begins not with slogans, but with a personal and collective commitment to public good.

### **Lessons on Governance, Dignity and Accountability from Biafra to Nigeria**

The trajectory of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's political journey-from his leadership of Biafra to his reintegration into Nigerian national politics-offers a unique lens through which to examine enduring questions about governance, human dignity, and accountability. While the Biafran struggle is often viewed solely in military or secessionist terms, it also carried with it a deeper political statement: a protest against the collapse of justice, fairness, and inclusive governance within the Nigerian federation. According to Ojukwu, Biafra was not just about ethnic identity; it was a moral argument against a state that had failed to protect its citizens. "Those dominated for too long now are tired of it and are ready to give whatever it takes in order to be free of the dominations."<sup>6</sup> Ojukwu's post-war reflections, particularly after his return from exile, revealed a man who was not only deeply invested in the Nigerian project, but one who demanded that it be built on justice and mutual respect.<sup>7</sup> He believed that the lessons of the war had to be used to correct the failures of the past, not to perpetuate bitterness. His later political engagements called for a restructured Nigeria-one where power was decentralised, institutions were strengthened, and the dignity of all citizens was respected regardless of their ethnic or regional background.

One of the most striking lessons from Ojukwu's thought is his insistence on accountability as the foundation of good governance. He often reminded Nigerians that leaders must be answerable not only to the law but to the moral expectations of the people. He saw the manipulation of power and the lack of consequences for corrupt behaviour as central obstacles to national unity and development.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Ojukwu's message was not limited to the South-East or to former Biafrans, it was a national call for leaders to be held to higher standards. His experience also highlighted the importance of dignity in political life. The Biafran episode, tragic as it was, revealed how central the need for respect, equity, and recognition is to the human condition. Ojukwu warned against the politics of humiliation-where groups feel neglected or reduced to second-class status. For him, no true federation could thrive where dignity was systematically denied. As Nigeria continues to grapple with regional tensions, poor leadership, and institutional decay, Ojukwu's legacy serves as both a warning and a guide. The lesson is clear (from Biafra to Nigeria) a nation cannot endure on the strength of its laws or military might alone; it must be grounded in fairness, accountable leadership, and a shared sense of belonging.<sup>9</sup> These were the ideals Ojukwu fought for, and they remain vital in the ongoing struggle to realise the full promise of the Nigerian state.

### **Political Decay in Post-Ojukwu Nigeria: A Crisis of Values**

Since the passing of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Nigeria has continued to face mounting political challenges that reveal not just institutional weaknesses but a deeper, more troubling crisis of values. The erosion of public trust, the normalisation of corruption, and the growing disconnect between leadership and the governed point to a country caught in a state of political decay. While systems of governance have become more elaborate, their moral foundations have weakened. Ojukwu's vision of leadership-anchored in honour, integrity, and national duty-has been increasingly replaced by a culture of impunity and expedience. In the years following Ojukwu's death, the rhetoric of reform and anti-corruption has grown louder, but the substance of leadership has become increasingly hollow.<sup>10</sup> Elections are routinely marred by manipulation and voter apathy, while public institutions are weakened by patronage and lack of accountability. The very ideals that Ojukwu espoused-merit, equity, and service-are now often treated as abstract aspirations, rarely embodied in political practice. This is not merely a failure of individual leaders but a reflection of a broader ethical collapse within the political class.

The disconnect between state and society has widened. Citizens are increasingly disillusioned, not because they lack hope, but because they no longer see themselves in the actions or priorities of those in power. Ojukwu warned of this disillusionment decades ago. He understood that when leadership loses its moral authority, governance becomes a performance-lacking substance, accountability, and soul.<sup>11</sup> This decay is not irreversible, but it demands more than technocratic fixes. It requires a return to values-those that guided Ojukwu's public life. His emphasis on moral clarity, national responsibility, and principled resistance to injustice remain critical standards by which to measure leadership today. The Nigerian state must begin to cultivate a political culture where service, not self-interest, defines public life. Without this moral grounding, no amount of reform will restore what has been lost. In reflecting on post-Ojukwu Nigeria, one cannot help but sense the widening gap between the political ideals of the past and the realities of the present. Yet, Ojukwu's legacy challenges us not to surrender to cynicism. Instead, it urges a return to the core values of truth, justice, and responsibility-values that must once again shape the soul of Nigerian politics.

### **Interpreting Modern Nigerian Leadership through Ojukwu's Thought**

To interpret corruption in modern Nigerian leadership through the lens of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's political thought is to confront it not just as a failure of governance, but as a profound betrayal of public trust and national purpose. Ojukwu understood leadership as a moral enterprise, rooted in duty to the people and to the nation's future. In his worldview, corruption was not simply an economic or legal issue-it was a betrayal of the very essence of leadership. It signified a collapse of honour, a desecration of responsibility, and an abandonment of the principles that ought to bind leaders to those they serve. Ojukwu repeatedly cautioned against the kind of leadership that placed personal enrichment above public service. He was deeply troubled by the culture of entitlement that had crept into Nigerian politics, where public office became an instrument of accumulation rather than sacrifice. According to Ojukwu, leadership required integrity and accountability, because the soul of a nation depended on the character of those who governed it.<sup>12</sup> He viewed corruption as more than just stealing from public coffers-it was a systematic distortion of values, where truth, merit, and justice were replaced by deceit, mediocrity, and impunity.

This betrayal became even more painful when seen against the background of Nigeria's unrealised potential. Ojukwu, though a product of privilege, chose a life of struggle and advocacy because he believed Nigeria could be better-fairer, stronger, and more principled. When leaders embezzle funds, manipulate institutions, or ignore the plight of citizens, they do not just break laws; they trample on the hopes of a generation. Ojukwu believed that to rule without conscience was to wound the nation in ways that policies alone could not repair.

Modern Nigerian leadership, when placed against Ojukwu's moral yardstick, reveals an unsettling divergence. The very behaviours he warned against have become widespread: unaccountable governance, ethnic politics, disregard for justice, and public silence in the face of wrongdoing. Yet, Ojukwu's voice still echoes-a reminder that political authority must be earned through service and guarded by conscience. To view corruption through Ojukwu's political thought is to recognise it as an ethical emergency, not just a governance flaw. It is a call to restore moral seriousness to public life. Until Nigerian leadership realigns with values of honesty, sacrifice, and national duty, the country's development will remain stunted, and the trust between the government and its people will continue to erode. This idea dovetails with Nweke and Nwoye when they question the depraved nature of the supposed leaders who are to instil discipline and moral values on the led.<sup>13</sup> Ojukwu's legacy invites today's leaders to choose a different path-not one of self-interest and betrayal, but of honour and service. That invitation remains open, though increasingly ignored. The question is whether there are still those willing to answer it.

### **Misinterpretations and Misappropriations as the Danger of Empty Heroism**

In the years since his death, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's legacy has often been celebrated in ways that are both selective and politically convenient. His image appears on posters, speeches reference his bravery, and public figures invoke his name when it suits their narratives. Yet, behind this public admiration lies a troubling trend-the misinterpretation and misappropriation of his ideals, often stripped of their moral depth and reduced to shallow symbolism. This kind of empty heroism, where a historical figure is glorified without a genuine commitment to the values he stood for, poses a serious threat to national memory and political responsibility. Ojukwu was not a flawless man, nor did he seek to be idolised. What he offered was a vision-complex, principled, and sometimes controversial-rooted in justice, accountability, and a profound sense of duty to his people. To remember him only as a military leader or ethnic icon is to flatten his thought and ignore the broader ethical framework that guided his political choices. When contemporary politicians invoke Ojukwu's name while embodying the very corruption and irresponsibility he denounced, they do more harm than good. They turn legacy into spectacle and memory into manipulation.

The danger in this kind of misappropriation is that it creates the illusion of continuity while masking profound departures from the original ideals. Heroism becomes performative, used to legitimize actions and policies that stand in direct contrast to the very principles the hero championed. Ojukwu's calls for moral leadership, inclusive governance, and national reform are often ignored by those who claim to follow in his footsteps. In doing so, they reduce his legacy to an empty shell-useful for applause, but hollow in meaning. This pattern of empty heroism reflects a deeper cultural discomfort with moral consistency. It is easier to celebrate a name than to live by its ideals. This kind of historical amnesia does a disservice to the present, because it robs citizens of authentic role models and replaces them with sanitised myths. Ojukwu's life, in all its complexity, offers far more than symbolic capital-it

offers ethical challenges that are still urgently relevant today. To honour Ojukwu truly is to wrestle with his convictions, to apply his critiques to present realities, and to embody the courage he demanded of those in power. This courage echoes the contents of communistic culture as espoused by Nwoye *et al.*<sup>14</sup> Anything less reduces him to a myth without substance—a hero praised, but not followed. And in a nation still seeking direction, that kind of heroism is not just inadequate; it is dangerous.

### **Conclusion**

The political thought of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu offers a compelling moral framework that examines the failures and possibilities of leadership in Nigeria. Far beyond the image of a war-time leader, Ojukwu emerges as a thinker whose convictions about honour, sacrifice, and national responsibility continue to resonate in the face of Nigeria's ongoing political decay. His life was shaped not only by struggle, but by a deep-seated belief that leadership must be rooted in service, truth, and an unflinching commitment to justice. In a nation where corruption has become normalised and public office often stripped of ethical seriousness, Ojukwu's legacy challenges both leaders and citizens to reclaim a politics of conscience. His ideas remind us that effective governance requires more than legal structures or economic plans—it requires character, moral clarity, and a willingness to put the collective good above personal gain. The repeated misappropriation of his image without fidelity to his values reflects a broader tendency in Nigerian politics, a situation that could be seen as a praise of heroes while ignoring their teachings. To interpret Ojukwu's political thought applying the hermeneutic is not merely to reflect on history, it is to confront the present with the weight of what leadership ought to be. Besides, Ojukwu's political thought provides not only a critique of what has gone wrong but a vision of what can still be made right. If Nigeria is to overcome its crisis of values, it must not only remember Ojukwu, but engage with the ethical substance of his life and thought—seriously, critically, and with the urgency that the times demand.

### **Recommendations**

The insights drawn from a hermeneutical reflection on the political thought of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu point toward urgent ethical reforms in leadership and governance in Nigeria. To restore integrity, accountability, and moral vision to public life, a number of recommendations are made:

- i. First, ethical education in political leadership training should be embedded so as to accommodate national framework for training political aspirants, elected officials, and public servants in ethics, civic responsibility, and moral leadership, using figures like Ojukwu as case studies. This would help reorient leadership from opportunism to service.
- ii. Secondly, the Use of National Symbols and Historical Legacies should also be revised to enable Government institutions and political actors refrain from misappropriating the image and legacy of national figures like Ojukwu for performative or self-serving ends. Instead, honest engagement with their ideas should be encouraged in educational curricula, public discourse, and policy reflection.
- iii. Thirdly, institutional accountability mechanisms should be strengthened by empowering and shielding anti-corruption agencies from political interference. Leadership inspired by Ojukwu's model requires mechanisms that ensure office holders are answerable to the people in practice, not just in rhetoric.

- iv. Fourthly, inclusive and value-based political dialogue should be promoted, by so doing it is believed that National dialogue initiatives should prioritise justice, equity, and dignity for all ethnic groups, echoing Ojukwu's advocacy for fairness in federalism. This could foster unity without erasing the diversity of the Nigerian experience.
- v. Finally, historical honesty in National narratives should also be encouraged to enable the story of Nigeria's past, particularly the Biafran experience, to be told in full-without shame, bias, or silence. Engaging honestly with the complexities of Ojukwu's life can help foster a more mature, reconciled, and morally grounded society.

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