
Interview: E.A. Opia



We are all determined to forge a united Nigeria

Professor Opia is a delegate to Nigeria's National Constitutional Conference from Delta State. He taught American history in the California public schools for many years. Lawrence Freeman and Uwe Friesecke interviewed him in Abuja, Nigeria on Oct. 6, 1994. See EIR of Dec. 16, 1994 for an analysis of the political situation in Nigeria, and the importance of the National Constitutional Conference.

EIR: How did you become a delegate to the Constitutional Conference here in Abuja?

Opia: When the government agreed on the methodology for membership to the conference, some of us decided that we would go out to our villages and seek nomination right from the grass roots. So we went home, stood for the election, and won.

Some of our colleagues approached us, and it was suggested there and then that an appointment would be appropriate for those who had first rejected an appointment. We wanted to be *elected*. We wanted to come here with a *mandate* from our constituencies, because some of us were determined that we would work for our country, *not* the government. The country is the thing to watch over, not the government's orders.

EIR: But yet, there are a great number of delegates who were appointed. Do you have any problems with that?

Opia: Initially, we had problems, I must be very honest with you. In the early stages of the conference, some of us tried very hard to draw a line between the elected candidates and the nominated candidates. Whenever we introduced ourselves, we would make certain that we made clear that we were elected.

But as the conference progressed, some of us realized that some of the appointed delegates were really not only experienced, but *were there with the same objectives, if not stronger objectives*, than those of us who were elected. And that commonality of objectives, of purpose, of determination, brought us closer together. And then the division disappeared.

EIR: What are your objectives within that conference?

Opia: Primarily, to write a constitution for our country, a constitution that is Nigerian, a constitution that will cater to *all* ethnic groups in Nigeria, *all* religionists in Nigeria,

including what we have now come to describe as native religionists.

We were tired of the divisions within the country. We were tired of the conflicts between the ethnic groups, and some of us resolved that we would write a constitution that would accommodate methodologies for resolving our conflicts constructively and not destructively.

EIR: What gives you the confidence that this conference will succeed? Some people say this is just a coverup for the military to hold onto power, not really a serious sovereign undertaking of the people of Nigeria.

Opia: Most people who do not believe in the constitution are of two groups: those who were disappointed because [Gen. Sani] Abacha did not hand over power to [Chief M.K.] Abiola; and those who could not win election to the Constitutional Conference. They are outsiders.

This government has refrained from publicizing the constitution, because the government gave a commitment that it would not be involved. And that's one of the reasons why those outside, who have access to tremendous resources, are using their resources to undermine the efficacy of the Constitutional Conference.

We are there. We are the ones working day and night. We are the ones trying to *find solutions* to the conflicts and problems of the nation, and I can tell you without any fear of contradiction, that I have to give Abacha credit, either for a stroke of genius or an act of God. Whatever he has done to make that conference happen, he should be credited, because it has never happened before. We have open, blank authority and power to reform the constitution. It has never happened in Nigeria before.

EIR: So you say there is a marked difference from the constitutional debates that have gone on in Nigeria's history so far, like the 1979 constitutional conference?

Opia: Of course. A tremendous difference. During the constitutional conferences that have happened hereto, they would have had the tendency to forget the differences of Nigeria, and predicate their work on the assumption that Nigeria is made up of one people. We deviated and categorically made it clear that Nigeria is made up of different peoples, and that we have differences, and that we should under-

stand our differences, so that we can better function as a nation. You also must recognize that there has never been any time in the history of Nigeria, when the people were given the opportunity to come into a conference with their own original thoughts, without a draft constitution—never.

EIR: Is there a provision in the formation of this Constitutional Conference, that the constitution has to be approved by General Abacha?

Opia: That is a slightly controversial area. In his statement, if I remember correctly, he used the expression that the Provisional Ruling Council would not “lightly or slightly set aside” any decision of the conference. And some of us have taken the position that the government *cannot* touch this constitution. If they want to touch the constitution, they should bring that area [of disagreement] back to us, to resolve it ourselves.

The representation here, is essentially superior to the representation that took place in the 1760s in the [U.S.] Continental Congress. The rural people were not represented in the process of forging the American Constitution; that’s a fact of history. We went back to the villages. They gave us the vote. We didn’t come because we’re educated. We came because our people, who elected us, have confidence in our ability to represent them in this conference, and to forge a viable Nigerian constitution. The process is essentially superior.

Let me go one step further. Are you aware that there was a controversy as to whether the debate should be open, or whether it should be *in camera*? Some people were of the opinion that for this thing to work, it had to be *in camera*. When it came to the floor, it [became] categorically clear that every person in Nigeria must know what is going on on the floor. That was how we opened the debate.

EIR: You said that the major difference in this debate, is that you are not negating the differences among the different groups in Nigeria. But what then, for you, creates the unity of the nation?

Opia: An understanding of our differences, and the will and determination of us all, for the first time in the history of Nigeria, to forge one nation, neutrally. And our resolve and determination that in any given area that is critical to the survival of the nation, we *will* resolve the problem by negotiation and consensus, and not by simple majority.

EIR: So, you think that the conflict that is often talked about, between north and south or southwest and east, that those conflicts are artificial?

Opia: They have ended those conflicts now. The methodology has been put in motion for us to end conflict. In the past, the conflicts, to a substantial degree, were always troubles about political power. Nigerian politicians *utilized and exploited* the differences, and those conflicts are predicated on what I call *cultural* differences, because Nigeria has plurality, there’s no way you can avoid it. Nigeria’s pluralism was compounded by what we now describe as ethnic nationali-

ties. And now we have resolved to make sure that all these communities and ethnic groups have protection under the constitution, and are guaranteed their rightful place in Nigeria. Once you do that—no conflict.

If you had seen the relief on the floor, after we agreed on the north-south rotation [of the presidency], it was like a huge load was taken off the back of most of us. Nobody believed it could work; but we did it, and then compounded it by also making sure that the governorship rotates.

EIR: Could you describe those two aspects?

Opia: Let me give you a small historical background, because one of the areas of conflicts is predicated on the conclusion that the north has always monopolized political power in the presidency, and anybody who has the presidential political power, controls everything. To a substantial degree they were right. But I’ve always asked them the question: If the north allegedly controlled it, because none of us were Presidents, can you show me any place in the north that they’ve used their resources to develop? The south is more developed than the north, despite the fact that northerners controlled political power. So, who has been the beneficiary?

Now, we see for a change, in this conference, we’re talking “honesty”—I mean, we have no room for any pretenders or hypocrisy here. Immediately you do it, you’re off. You lose credibility instantly. And so, some larger-than-life politicians here have lost credibility already, because they were caught *lying*. And the people don’t have respect for them any more, and they will not go beyond their village any more, because the days of liar politicians are over.

Let me go back again.

So, quite a number of people felt that it was important that this presidential power must go around. There was some resistance: Some people refused; some people even were of the opinion that *we* controlled political power: “*You* control economic power. You control the press!” We said, “What are you talking about? It’s a balance.”

Go to America: I asked the American representative, “Since the Civil War, how many Presidents have you had from the south?” Carter and this young Clinton; that’s all. Jimmy Carter was a good man, and he lasted for four years. Somebody mentioned Johnson. I said, “Forget Johnson. Johnson was a beneficiary of the Kennedy myth. So, he was not elected on his own, and he did not have the courage to run for the second time because of Vietnam.” That was how Nixon came into power.

Now, the point I’m trying to make is that we do not want the American experience. We want the northerners to accept in principle that we are one, and the only way to guarantee that is to accept in principle that the presidency, which is the most sought-after position in the country, can be held by a northerner for eight years, and a southerner for eight years, and we rotate it. Then, the northerners brilliantly brought in a new dimension. They said: Since we are rotating the presidency, the governorship is also a very powerful posi-

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tion. Maybe we should consider rotating the governorship.

EIR: How would this work for the governors, then?

Opia: Very simple. No one group can produce the governor for more than eight years at a time, so they rotate within the three senatorial districts. And the three senatorial districts are normally divided along the lines, all historical association, historical antecedents, ethnic affiliation, cultural affinities.

So, in our differences and in our diversity, we are finally finding unity. And then, of course, the most beautiful aspect of it all, is that the intermarriages going on in Nigeria are phenomenal; and that is bringing the nation closer and closer together.

But, let's be honest. The search and the struggle for political power is the main source of all our problems, and politicians have a tendency to exploit it. But now, the constitution *guarantees* literally everybody an equal opportunity to aspire for the highest office in the land. The American Constitution guarantees it, but American prejudices militate against it. When did a Catholic become a President in America? Wasn't it JFK who was the first one? Have you had another one ever since? The country won't elect a Catholic as a President. Are you telling me that a black in America today, can easily become a President? They've been [floating a trial balloon] recently with [Gen. Colin] Powell. But America is still going through its own evolutionary process.

We *are* a corollary. There's no way you can run away from it. But Americans must learn that they have to leave us alone to evolve our own system. The best it can do, is to support us, and, if possible, allow us to steal American technology in order to develop our country, the way the Japanese did. And we shall do it; but let us get our act together politically.

EIR: How did you resolve the so-called June 12 issue in the Constitutional Conference?

Opia: Very simple, very simple. You see, the June 12 issue was discussed—a number of people have different feelings about it—but one thing is clear now: that there was an election on June 12, and that election was annulled, and the problem is in the hands of the judiciary. Let the judiciary handle it.

But some of us are resolved, that never again in the history of Nigeria, will *anybody* cancel the result of the new election that has been completed. Never again. And somebody was asking me the other day: What if the military de-

cides to take your paper, throw it in the dustbin, and continue to rule? I said, "Let them try." The pro-democracy revolt will be child's play.

Can you imagine, each and every one of us going to the village to mobilize his constituents? Do you know what that would do to Nigeria? I sincerely doubt there will be any interference at all in what is going on here. And I can tell you: I cannot speak for 100% of the people, because that would be terribly ambitious. But I can speak for 95%, and that's pretty good. Even in the American Continental Congress, it took them two years to complete—and after the Congress, after some people accepted the Constitution, some states *refused* to accept the Constitution, because they were afraid. They were afraid. They wanted to attain their rights.

EIR: Could you tell us if you have any documentation of the support or outside support of the various opposition groups, the Nadeco [National Democratic Coalition] and others, that were financed and sponsored outside of Nigeria to destabilize the country?

Opia: Putting it bluntly, we had a dinner with the Canadian Acting High Commissioner, and it was clear from the discussion that they were supporting and funding the pro-democracy group.

EIR: Who are they?

Opia: The Canadians. I mean, all of us who were there were shocked. But I was also given to understand, that it's *not only* the Canadians who are doing that, and the Canadians made it clear that they have a 5% interest in our oil industry, and the gentleman who invited us to dinner stated categorically that oil does not grow on trees; so, you see where economic interests override the interests of Nigerians for the Nigerian nation.

Then also, I have to give him credit for one thing. He went on to state that it was "our opinion that our interests can only be preserved through liberal democracy. So we have to support any movement or counter-movement that permits liberal democracy." One of us asked him: "Is destructive resistance democracy?"

I've always maintained that, in this so-called project, if the people were serious, there was only one answer: They should have all gone to their homes, gotten elected, and come here with a blank check, and elect Abiola on the floor. That was the logical thing to do. But some of them did not even have the courage to go home to stand for election.