

The Imagery of War in Chinua Achebe's *There was a Country*

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Abstract

Achebe's war memoir, *There was a country, a personal history of Biafra*, has elicited different reactions from the public. Some critics have condemned the memoir for creating the impression that Biafra once existed, others for re-opening the old wounds of the Nigerian Civil War. The memoir's noble objective of protecting the territorial integrity of Nigeria and preventing it from relapsing into yet another avoidable season of anomie is often ignored. This paper, therefore, using postmodernism as a theoretical tool, examines Achebe's portrayal of the war, its causes and impact on Nigeria. The memoir blames the Nigerian civil war on poor leadership. *There was a country* is not a justification of Biafra but rather a re-evaluation of the human mistakes that led to it. As a cautionary note, it is one of Achebe's finest contributions to our understanding of the political sociology of contemporary Nigeria. We may disagree with Achebe, but we cannot deny the monumental threats facing the corporate existence of Nigeria. Since independence, Nigeria's social landscape has been characterised by war/peace. The unity of the country is like a sieve leaking from every angle.

Introduction

This paper is an evaluation of Chinua Achebe's personal account of the Nigerian civil war as contained in his memoir *There was a country : a personal history of Biafra* henceforth identified in this paper as *There was a country* or abbreviated as TWC. At independence in 1960, there were hopes that Nigeria would be a stronghold for democracy in Africa. It was a nation with huge mineral resources and its population too is creative. In the opinion of Richard Dowden (441), Nigeria could provide the human energy and the needed capital to transform Africa into a modern continent.

However, six years into independence, the country had to contend with serious socio- political crises. The crises of the 60's are often linked to the

processes which led to the emergence of Nigeria as a country. Prior to the amalgamation of 1914, Nigeria was occupied by independent ethnic nation states. Apart from the differences in tongue, culture, and custom, each nation state has administrative structures and institutions that were peculiar to it. Some nation states were a cephalous while others had recognised political institutions and structures. Lord Lugard ignored these differences and lumped all the colonial possessions of Britain in the Niger area into one country, Nigeria.

Since its creation in 1914, how to manage Nigeria and transform Nigeria into a progressive modern state has remained a political puzzle. Nigeria is perennially in a state of peace/war. A state according to Max Weber is any physical territory in which a particular group could assert effective control and authority. This control / authority in the opinion Weber is based on five capital: Economic, Information Juridical, Symbolic and the capital of physical force. "The state is an x which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and symbolic violence over a definite territory and over the totality of the corresponding population" Bourdieu (3).

Britain, using its economic and physical capital, conquered, and colonised the various ethnic groups in Nigeria and brought them under British administrative control. In the southern part of Nigeria, assisted by district officers (DOs), Lugard adopted the policy of direct administration while in the northern part, he adopted the policy of indirect rule. "Nigeria grew up with two distinct identities: one western oriented and the other, Islamic oriented", Clement Okafor (33). The competition for the control of the political space in Nigeria by these two conflicting identities has become a recurrent decimal in Nigerian politics.

In 1960, after several negotiations and constitutional conferences, independence was granted to Nigeria. Awolowo warned the new nation, especially the leaders, to be conscious of the challenges ahead. According to him:

It is incontestable that the British not only made Nigeria but also hand it to us on their own surrender. But the Nigeria which they handed over to us had in it the forces of its own disintegration. It is up to Nigerian leaders to neutralize these forces...

(www.obafemiawolowofoundation.org/)

The forces Awolowo alluded to are tribalism, ethnicity, and religious differences. Instead of neutralizing these forces and facing the onerous task of nation building, the political elites busied themselves struggling for power.. Corruption became

rampant. There was general apathy throughout the nation. This led to the military coup of 1966. The coup organised by majors Chukwuma Nzeogwu in the North and Emmanuel Ifeajuna in the South (both Ibos) was aimed at ending the kleptomaniac altitude and insensitivity of the politicians of the first republic. In his coup speech, Nzeogwu described the enemies of Nigeria “as the political profiteers, the swindlers, men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and VIPS of waste”...Martin Meredith(194).

The coup, despite its patriotic fervor and intention, created more problems for Nigeria. It killed more people, especially politicians and military officers from the Northern region than from other regions. To worsen the situation, power was transferred to Ironsi who hailed from the same region with the coup plotters. The North perceived this as a calculated attempt to reduce its political influence in Nigeria.

In 1967, there was a counter coup which led to the removal of Ironsi and his replacement by Yakubu Gowon, a military officer from the north. This did not go down well with the Eastern region.

The downfall of Ironsi, the return of Northerners to power, the murder of Eastern officers, the mouths of persecution and massacres in the North – produced a mood of anger and outrage that drove the East towards secession, Martin Meredith (202).

The Eastern region consultative assembly on May 27, 1967 mandated colonel Ojukwu, the then military Governor of Eastern Region to declare *at the earliest practicable date, Eastern Nigeria, a free, sovereign and independent state by the name and title of the Republic of Biafra*, TWC (91). On 30th May, 1967, acting on the strength of this mandate, Ojukwu declared the republic of Biafra; a name which according to Achebe was derived from the Bight of Biafra, TWC(149). But according to Ojukwu, Biafra was not a separatist movement as propaganda made it to appear, it was rather a reflect for self-preservation.(177).After several failed attempts and negotiations to bring the East back into the federation, Gowon on 6th July, 1967, ordered a limited police action to force the eastern region back into the Nigerian federation. There was a skirmish and that marked the beginning of the Nigerian civil war. The war lasted for three years (1967-70) and led to the death of three million Nigerians TWC (227).

The Nigerian civil war is a subject of many fictional narratives. It has, in the opinion of Achebe and Chidi Amuta, "provided more writers with subject than any other historical event in Nigeria", Jane Bryce (32). And according to Oike Machiko (60) „it has provided the fertile ground for African writers to dramatize the problem of the African nation“. The war created humanitarian crises comparable to that of Rwanda or southern Sudan. Forty years after, "its ugly scars on the Nigerian mind and soul remain visible and glaring, Iniobong I. Uko (49). The events of the war, the human suffering, and the physical and psychological dislocations provided writers the creative platform with which to examine Nigeria and the challenges facing it.

Literature Review

The perspective about the war differs between writers. Some have written to prove their innocence, some to show how the war was won and lost, others to make quick money and a few to justify the principles and cause in which they believe, Isidore Diala (114). The traumatic events of the Nigerian civil war directly and indirectly affected the artists in Nigeria. Those of them who were of Ibo extraction became directly involved in the conflict. Christopher Okigbo a brilliant poet lost his life at the battle front, Achebe (TWC, 184). Those who survived used their artistic talents to record and document their war experience. They wrote poems, plays, short stories, and novels about the war. Some of Nigerian war narratives are : Chuckwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawa*, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, Flora Nwapa's, *Never again*, Rose Njoku, *Withstand the storm* Leslie Jean Ofoegbu, *Blow the fire*, Catherine Acholonu, *Into the Heart of Biafra*.

Flora Nwapa's *Never again* documents the bitter/dehumanising experiences of women during the Nigerian civil war. Many of them lost their sons and husbands to the war. Their daughters were raped and abandoned. .Because of this, she concludes that Nigeria should *never again* pass through the same experience.

Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1972) is his prison notes on the Nigerian civil war. Soyinka was arrested and imprisoned by the military Government of Gowon because of his opposition to the war, and his criticism/ condemnation of the insensitivity of Nigeria's political elites. Despite the unstable political situation

and the threat to his personal life, Soyinka mobilised public opinion against the war. To Soyinka, „The man dies in all who keeps quiet in the face of tyranny and oppression“ (72). He was arrested and sent to Kaduna prison.

Rose Njoku's *withstand the storm* is an autobiography about her war experience. Her husband was a military officer in the Nigerian army. During the *Araba* (Hausa, let's separate) crises, he was forced to go back to the Eastern region and joined the Biafra army. This created for his wife and immediate family identity crises. In the east, the family (because of the residence in the North) was seen as belonging to the *vandals* while to the North, because (by birth) they were from the East, they were seen as enemies. This identity crisis still confronts Nigerians till today. Nigerians living outside their states of origin or places of birth are often seen by their host communities as *foreigners*.

Achebe like many creative writers from Nigeria wrote about the Nigerian civil war. His works on the civil war include: *Beware soul brother* (1971), *Girls at war and other stories* (1972). Achebe's war memoir *There was a country, a personal history of Biafra* is the main focus of this paper. It is Achebe's finest contribution to the (unending) Nigerian narrative. A narrative that has become both painful and hurting.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the monumental sufferings and the catastrophic experiences of the civil war, the unity of Nigeria is still under grave threats. Inter and Intra ethnic conflicts are on the increase. Suspicion between the regions and their representatives as happened in the 60's is on the increase. Nigerians living in states other than their own are forced back to their states of origin through administrative fiat. Nigerians today will likely identify themselves as Easterners, Southerners, Westerners and Northerners than as Nigerians. The passion for the Nigerian nation is waning. The ability of the federal Government to enforce its authority on some issues is on the decline. Separatists groups are on the increase. During the civil war, Nigeria had to contend with only one armed group, the Biafran army. Presently, it is estimated that close to 23 armed groups (*Boko Haram, Niger Delta Avengers, Egbsu Boys, ACF, OPC, MOSSOD,...*) are now operating in the country. The demand for regional autonomy /confederation is on the increase. John Camp Bell (23) in *Nigeria: Dancing on the brink* outlines the

various threats to the corporate existence of Nigeria. The threat to Nigeria's unity is more obvious now than during the civil war.

Unfortunately, Nigerian leaders are behaving as if nothing is amiss. This is where Achebe's war memoir, *There was a country*, becomes relevant. It is a passionate appeal to Nigerians and their leaders to avoid the human mistakes that led to the tragic events of the past. As a writer, Achebe is using his creative talents to warn his country men and women of the dangers ahead. "The artist conveys truth...historical and social truths...literature is not a reflection of the social process but the abridgement and summary of history", Austin Warren (95). *There was a country* is Achebe's personal history of Nigeria.

Objectives

- (a) to situate Achebe's memoir in a better historical perspective (b) draw attention to his concerns with the fate of Nigeria.
- (c) use the memoir to remind Nigeria of the catastrophic events of the 60's and to warn of the dangers ahead.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical tool used in assessing Achebe's *There was a country* is post modernism. Post modernism was first used in 1947 to describe a mode of architectural style, Fowler and Childs (185). Post modernism influences the debates about artistic production and interpretation. It describes a period after modernism. Post modernism was used to describe the subversive fiction of writers like Samuel Beckett and John Barth. Unlike modernism which isolates the writer from the influences of society, Post modernism recognises the likely influence/ link between society and an artistic product. In post modernism, every artistic work is expected to have an ideology which gives a clue to its vision /perception/ and interpretation of society. Achebe's war memoir is his personal interpretation, and perception of the Nigerian civil war. His position on the war and the factors responsible for it are well stated in the memoir. Post modernism is supported with Realism.

The oxford dictionary of literary terms (2001) defines Realism as a mode of writing that gives *the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life*. It is a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description (i.e.

verisimilitude and to a more general altitude that rejects idealization, escapism... in favour of recognising soberly the actual problems of life). Although there are different interpretations of realism, the objective is one. According to the Routledge *Dictionary of literary terms*, (199), "All theories of realism, however sophisticated, rest on the assumption that the novel imitates reality and that reality is more or less stable and commonly accessible, p.199. The events of the Nigerian civil war are commonly accessible to Achebe. He was a victim, observer and active participant.

Achebe's description of the human tragedy, misery, deaths, destruction and starvation occasioned by the war is simple and succinct. During the war, people on both sides of the conflict were subjected to untold hardships and suffering. Nigeria as a nation suddenly became a *nightmare*. There is a visible correlation between the events of Nigeria's civil war and Achebe's account of them in his memoir. The first coup of January 15, 1966 is well documented. The events that led to it, the subsequent counter coup and the pogrom that eventually ensued, are also well narrated.

Another important element of *Realism* in this memoir is that the war could have been avoided. Nigeria's challenge, as Achebe presents it in this memoir, is not ethnicity, tribalism or religion, but rather leadership. The memoir blames the Nigerian civil war squarely on leadership failure. „We were plagued by a home grown enemy: the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, and corruption of the ruling class“, TWC (243). Achebe reaffirms this several times in the memoir.

The two principal characters of the war – Gowon and Ojukwu, are realistically presented. The strengths and weaknesses of each of them are adequately highlighted. Their weaknesses as leaders and that of their followers, contributed immensely, to the sad events of 1966-70. To avoid a repeat of the mistakes of the 60's and to secure the future of Nigeria, Achebe decided to document his civil war experience in the form of a memoir..

Background to the war: Achebe's perspective

Despite the insinuations from many quarters and the violent reactions to his memoir, it is Achebe's singular desire to see a peaceful, united and prosperous Nigeria. According to him: "There was enough talent, enough education for us to have been able to arrange our affairs more efficiently more – meticulously..."

(TWC 158). To him, Nigeria is a beautiful country, a country with huge potentials. "A land of great hope and progress, a nation with immense resources at its disposal..." (TWC 2). As a sign of his love for Nigeria, despite the several threats to his life for predicting Nigeria's first military coup in his novel *A man of the people* (1958), he refuses to leave Lagos. Lagos was his country's capital and he was proud of it. "I was one of the last to leave Lagos. I simply could not bring myself to accept that I could no longer live in my **nation's** capital..." (TWC 71).

The immediate factor leading to the war, he argues is Nigeria's leadership failure. It was leadership failure that led to Nigeria's first coup. The coup, in his opinion, could have been averted, if the leaders were more visionary and more concerned about their nation.

As we reached the brink of full blown war, it became clear to me that the chaos enveloping all of us in Nigeria was due to the incompetence of the Nigerian ruling class. They clearly have a poor grasp of history and found it difficult to appreciate and grapple with Nigeria's ethnic and political complexity. (TWC 69)

Instead of grappling with the challenges of leadership, the politicians were busy looting the nation. Six years after independence, Nigeria according to him, was a cesspool of corruption.

Within six years of this tragic colonial manipulation, Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and mis-rule. public Servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth. TWC (51)

Nigeria, he feels is plagued by a home grown enemy manifested in the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline ethnic bigotry and corruption of the ruling class (TWC 243).

The Imagery of War

A memoir is an individual's record of their perception of momentous public events, Isidore Diala (112). Achebe's memoir is a graphic and detailed account of his personal experience of the Nigerian Civil war. The imagery of war in this memoir is that of a destructive agent. The Nigerian civil war was totally

destructive. Those who suffered the most were not politicians, but innocent Nigerians on both sides of the divide.

Achebe describes the war as a *cataclysmic experience*, *TWC* (p2). It created a humanitarian crisis, in his opinion, of epic proportions. The first imagery of the war is that of social and physical dislocation. Like many refugees, Achebe too was constantly on the move. "During the war years one never really unpacked. One always had the belongings in the trunks of the car and took only the absolute necessities into the temporary shelter", (*TWC*, 201).

Another vivid imagery of war in this memoir is that of hunger and starvation. Biafra was deliberately blocked and no food was allowed into this new republic, Emeffena Ezeani (227). This led to massive malnutrition, marasmus and kwashiorkor among children. Starvation led to the death of many people. Achebe personally saw rotten bodies lying by the road side un-buried. He writes:

Bodies lay rotting under the hot sun by the road side and the flapping wings of scavengers could be seen circling, wailing, watching patiently nearby...(TWC, 210).

During the war, there was an upsurge in mental related illnesses. Achebe describes the psychiatry related problems caused by the Nigerian civil war as an epidemic on a scale that was never seen before. According to him:

Another epidemic that was not talked about much, a silent scourge – explosion of mental illness major depression, psychosis, Schizophrenic, manic depression, personality dis-order, grief response, post traumatic disorder, anxiety dis-orders etc. on a scale none of us had ever witnessed. (*TWC*, 195).

Sudden deaths were also a daily occurrence during the war. Achebe lost his best friend, Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo died in August 1967 at Ekwegbe, close to Nsukka, *TWC* (.184). In a single aerial attack on Afo Umouhiagu market, three thousand lives were lost. Most of those killed were women, Emeffena Ezeani (135). Christie Achebe's eye witness account is pathetic : the bombardment from the Nigeria Air Force on this day was particularly heavy, as if the pilots had been upset at not discovering the market sooner...in the morning we discovered the most harrowing of sights. One image still haunts me till today: that of a pregnant woman split into two by the Nigerian blitz. *TWC* (189).

Another imagery of war in this memoir is the use of mercenaries. Both sides during the war recruited mercenaries to help prosecute the war. Achebe was

an eye witness to the brutal killing of a mercenary from Chad or Mali TWC (174). In an ironic twist of history, mercenaries are involved in the ongoing *fight/war* (?) with *Boko Haram* insurgents in the *North east*.

As a victim, a witness and an active participant in the crises, Achebe is using his memoir to warn Nigeria not to give room for other avoidable social crises as occurred in the 60's. This he feels should be his role as a writer. In his opinion, the African writer, because of his/her peculiar historical circumstance, cannot write without a message, or a commitment to his people.

I believe that it is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message some kind of protest ...
TWC (p.58)

Achebe's memoir is a protest. A protest against Nigeria's unconscious repeat of the mistakes of the past. It is also against corruption. Corruption in Nigeria, according to him, *has passed the alarming stage and entered the fatal stage and Nigeria will die if we continue to pretend that she is only slightly indisposed*. TWC, (249). The political class in Nigeria, he submits, „was consumed with individual and ethnic pursuits and with the accumulation of material and other resources“.

Corruption was wide spread and those in power were using every means at their disposal, including bribery, intimidation and blackmail, to cling to power““, TWC (72). Citing the UNO, Achebe submits that from independence to date Nigeria, has lost **400 billion dollars** to corruption ,TWC (.249) An amount which he feels is approximately the gross domestic products of Norway and Sweden.

Centrifugal forces, hiding under religion and tribalism are resurfacing in many parts of Nigeria. The North Eastern part of Nigeria has become a theatre of war. In the opinion of General Theophilus Danjuma, ironically, Gowon's military commander during the civil war, Nigeria is again at war, but this time, the situation is worse and more complex, because the enemy is not well defined. In his words: “we are in the middle of a civil war in northern Nigeria .There is no defined front in this particular war and worse still, the enemy is faceless and unknown. There is no immunity for anyone.” (Daily trust, print, Sept.4, 2013, pp 6.) Contrary to the spirit of the constitution, some states in Nigeria today have peculiar state symbols.

Thirty years after independence, Nigeria is yet to conduct a free and fair election. Electoral fraud has become a permanent feature of Nigerian politics. The social system has collapsed. No state in Nigeria can boast of twenty – four hours uninterrupted water or electricity supply for one month. The Educational system is under threat. ASUU, the central body for University teachers in Nigeria, is often on strike to correct one social anomaly or the other. It is general disenchantment and frustration. Many youths are unemployed. Anti –social behaviours (cultism, rape) are on the increase. Kidnapping has become a big business. The threat to life in contemporary Nigeria is worse now than during the civil war. During the civil war, there was no record of two hundred innocent school girls being kidnapped at one swoop in the dead of the night. Nigeria is currently embroiled in many *low grade wars*. These wars are causing the nation a lot in human and material resources. Resources that should be used for development are channeled to the prosecution of these wars.

This is not the Nigeria of many dreams. . Soyinka’s *the open sore of a continent, a personal narrative of the Nigerian civil war* (33) shows that his dream of Nigeria is comparable to that of Achebe. Soyinka’s dream in the sixties was that of:

belonging to an unstoppable nation rich in human and material resources, a nation endowed with a seeming gift of leadership, one whose citizens anywhere in the world would be revered, courted as plenipotentiaries in their own right simply by the possession of the Nigerian passport.(33)

Several years after the war, Nigeria seems not to have learnt any lessons from its ugly past. In the opinion of Godwin Onyeachole, Nigeria has already collapsed:

Except in the eyes of the extremely naive and incurable swindlers in the corridors of power, this country has already collapsed; only that the horror of its probable disintegration would be difficult to face. (Cited by Chido Onumah, Sahara Reporters)

Is Achebe once again prophetic? Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Rwanda Central Africa Republic, are painful reminders. There is still a window of hope. “Every generation must recognize and embrace the task it is peculiarly designed by history and by providence to perform”, Achebe (37). The task before every Nigerian is to promote and protect the unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria. In

spite of its many shortcomings and imperfections, Nigeria remains our country. Corruption and the politics of *cuwa-cuwa* (Hausa, chop I chop) are the greatest threats to the corporate existence of Nigeria. *Cuwa-cuwa* (bribery/corruption) has inflicted more pains, denied more children access to quality education and killed more dreams in Nigeria than any other event in the history of Nigeria. To be great again, Nigeria must achieve peace within her own borders, evolve a leadership that is free and enlightened, and organise her own society, Emeka OdumegwuOjukwu(37). As the present regime is trying its best to address some of the challenges facing Nigeria, the following recommendations may be considered.

Conclusion

Achebe's memoir is both evaluative and predictive. There is no greater love a writer can show his country than to keep reminding it of its shortcomings, weaknesses and challenges. This Achebe seeks to in *There was a country*. Nigeria can only ignore him at its own peril.

Recommendations

- Achebe's memoir should not be dismissed as self-serving as currently done in some quarters. Its patriotic message should be studied and analysed.
- Grievances of ethnic and minority groups should be addressed with fairness and justice. The Nigerian state should give its citizens justice instead of bullets, bread instead of pains, peace instead of psychological trauma.
- There should be greater transparency in governance. Corruption, no matter how little should be resisted.

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