

**HOW THE ISSUES OF SECESSION AND CONFEDERATION COULD HAVE PREVENTED THE NIGERIA – Biafra War:
A Review of Achebe’s There Was A Country.**

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ABSTRACT: *The book There Was a Country by Chinua Achebe published shortly before he died has taken a central place in the list of political literature of Nigeria. Written in lucid prose and boldly addressing the gargantuan issues that brought down the nation’s first republic, Achebe pointed accusing fingers at those actors who brought untold hardship on his people, Ndigbo for which he has been severely criticized. Carefully crafted and well researched, the book is not one to be wished away. The book challenges the West, particularly Great Britain for the ugly roles they played during the war. This article takes a different look at the unfortunate event and other ways that could have prevented the civil war.*

KEYWORDS: Secession, Confederation, Biafra War, Nigeria, Achebe

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, as a nation, has in deed had very chequered historical experiences, which at every twist and turn, continually question the logic of her existence as a nation. These experiences continue to interrogate and redefine the basic assumptions of nationhood. Many commentators on Nigeria see Nigeria as a child who was, to avoid sounding immodest, sick on delivery (Hardliners would prefer “dead” on delivery). But the point however is that there is a fundamental, internal contradiction connected with her historical circumstance as a nation. Surprisingly, however, her resilience and determination to wade through her numerous historical oddities overwhelm all human imaginations. It might be safe to believe that no nation in the world has been able to contend with Nigeria’s type of dichotomous experiences and yet survives as a nation.

The Nigerian – Biafran War was one of such experiences which threatened her existence as one country. It was a war predicated on myriads of problems ranging from religious intolerance and ultimately, the imbalanced structure of her political federalism. The contraption of 1914 which yoked dichotomous peoples together in a strange political arrangement was obviously predicated on economic and political interest of the British. This weak economic and political institutional framework, lopsided as it were, erected the claim of dominance by one group over the others and consequently triggered off litanies of conflicts and contestations upon independence. The parliamentary constitution made no adequate provision for positive socio-economic transformation and national integration (Anifowise 1999). The matter was not helped by the ineptitude of the political class who fuelled ethnic wrangling which peaked with the crises generated by the 1962/63 census and the federal election which was characterized by “atavisms, blatant thuggery, intimidation of opponents, electoral gerrymandering among other disturbances that plunged Nigeria into a political rebus and rocked the first republic” (Enuka 314).

The above observations are undoubtedly what watered the ground for the Nigeria – Biafran war which is the subject of Chinua Achebe's book, There was A country. The book could not have come at a more auspicious moment in our national life than now. Moreover, the book's stated mission is quite clear and straightforward: to know where the rain started beating Nigeria so that she might know where she would dry her body. All the contentious issues that nearly disintegrated the country during the first republic leading to the civil war are still here with us in a more bizarre dimension. The current onslaught of the Islamic fundamentalists known as the Boko Haram on the people of Nigeria and more frighteningly, their connection with international terrorist organizations like al Qaeda, Herzezbollah and Iran no doubt pose serious threat to the peaceful co-existence of the country. No sane mind should blind himself to the harsh realities of Nigeria's possible disintegration, if the issues raised in There Was A Country are not frontally engaged and constructively combatted.

Politically and economically, the book reminds us that true federalism, with the federating units paying taxes to the centre while independently working out their destinies is the critical panacea for socio-economic transformation and national integration. But where the imperative of true federalism is rejected, secession is invited. Eneka while discussing the numerous conflicts which threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria and in advocating the convocation of a sovereign national conference, poses the hard questions "but is there any wrong if separation and division of the country becomes the supreme will of the people?" (Ikenga 2008)

Achebe stirred the hornet nest with his book, There Was a Country. Although the pains of the coups may have lessened, the various tribes in the country are not in a hurry to let bygone be bygone. In the book, Achebe stoutly defends his people in lucid prose and in a language that is affectionate and deeply touching. He saw the massacre of Ndigbo during the war as genocide, precipitated by the overzealous act of a few military officers. It was another moment for Ndigbo to bemoan their position in Nigeria, a country they had labored so hard to help build.

Achebe's literary stature sent the book to the rank of a bestseller and the controversy it generated boosted its sales. Achebe was quoted as being surprised by the controversy the book had generated, appearing to underrate the old wounds it had reopened. The North for instance was reminded of the killing of Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and some senior military officers. For the West, the book had maligned their idol, Chief Obafemi Awolowo who was accused of being behind most of the policy decisions that adversely affected Ndigbo during and after the civil war. The controversy did not even abate with the death of Achebe, whose eulogies were spasmodically marred by tantrums and negative outbursts.

The press had a field day reporting the event but Achebe's charges stood like an albatross that would not go away. Although praises were high and tempers sourly inflamed, some critics chose to be cautious; perhaps because book review in Nigeria was an inglorious martyrdom and a double edged sword that had been known to kill their bearers too. Professor Wole Soyinka in an interview maintained his earlier stand but added a little pep: "The Igbos must remember, however, that they were not militarily prepared for that war. I told Ojukwu this point blank, when I visited Biafra. Sam Aluko also revealed that he did. A number of leaders

outside Biafra warned the leadership of this plain fact. Bluff is no substitute for bullets” (Soyinka 10).

Similarly, Ayinla in his article titled “In Dispraise of Achebe” published in The Nations Newspaper believed that Soyinka was merely patronizing in his statement:

“Perhaps the laureate also fell into the African mantra of not speaking ill of the dead. Achebe’s ethnic irredentism did not just start with his last book. It was a continuation of his war against Awolowo and his race. If you read the book very well, you could see his profuse eulogies for the Flora Nwapas, the Christopher Okigbos, the Cyprain Ekwensis, and none for any other ethnic national. It was as if only the Igbos existed. As great as Achebe was as a literary icon of note, his global size was terribly diminished by his consuming tribal inclination. What then is the difference between Achebe the tribal warlord and Joseph Conrad whose Heart of Darkness he vilified for his racist inclinations? (Mukai 21).

But if truth must be told, Nigerians had shown throughout history that they had misgivings about the composition of the Nigerian state. Strident efforts were made by the early nationalists to determine their destinies but on each occasion they let the golden opportunity slip through their fingers. For instance, the crisis created by the motion for “Self Government in 1956” tabled in the House of Representatives by Chief Anthony Enahoro was a good opportunity. The Sardauna of Sokoto countered the motion by replacing the words “in 1956” with as “soon as possible” which both the Action Group(AG) and National Council for Nigerian Citizens(NCNC) construed as delaying tactic and in protest walked out of the House. Francis Adigwe pointed out that:

After the adjournment, members of the Northern delegation confronted hostile crowds of people in Lagos, crowds who insulted and jeered at them. It became apparent that the unity of the country was at stake. The Northern delegation threatened they would not come to the South for any future legislative assembly. In the meantime, all attempts to appoint other members from Western Region into the Council of Ministers proved futile. It was not surprising therefore that the Central Executive then became constitutionally powerless to discharge its functions (Adigwe 203).

The Northern Region consequently passed the “Eight Point Programme” in May 1953 that would have eased the Region successfully from the rest of the federation if it had been implemented. It was in an attempt by the six month alliance of NCNC and AG to campaign for self government in 1956 led by Chief S.L Akintola that led to the four day Kano riot of May 1953 where 21 Southerners and 15 Northerners were killed and 241 people were reported wounded. Similarly, AG had in the Lagos Conference of 1954 struggled to no avail to insert “a secession clause” into the constitution (Adigwe 204). They had also protested over the neutralization of Lagos and its detachment from the Western Region. Could it be then that the crisis of inability to break away from the federation in the past that united the West and the North to resist the Biafran secession? But some historians do not think so; they argue that the primary cause of the civil war was the oil in the Niger Delta Region.

Many Nigerians from other ethnic groups mostly have been unsettled by what they consider as Achebe’s imprudence in handling some very sensitive national issues in the book. Nigeria’s constitution guarantees freedom of expression. But Achebe’s right to express himself has been challenged by his compatriots, based perhaps on the dictum that your freedom of expression ends where mine begins. The question then is: What is a writer’s

license and where does his freedom begin and end? Soyinka in the same interview cited earlier says this of his opinion of the book and his relationship with the writer before he died: No. Chinua and I never discussed *There Was a Country*. Matter of fact, that aborted visit I mentioned earlier would have been my opportunity to take him on with some friendly fire at that open forum, continuing at his home over a bottle or two; Achebe's wife Professor Christie cooking. A stupendous life companion by the way, Christie deserves a statue erected to her for fortitude and care on behalf of us all. More of that will emerge; I am sure, as the tributes pour in. Unfortunately that chance of a last encounter was missed, so I do not really wish to comment on that work at this point. It is however, a book I wish he had not written, not in the way it was. There are statements in that work that I wish he had never made (Soyinka 10).

In another dimension, many Nigerians across tribes have continued to evaluate the role of Dim Chukwemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, particularly his courage during the civil war, his neutrality during the 1966 coup, his use of his father's resources to prosecute the war and his achievements despite limited resources. But a few feel Ojukwu lost golden opportunities like his inability to tap the rich knowledge of the first President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and the former Premier of the Eastern Region, Dr. Michael Okpara. They also argue that Ojukwu was quite wrong in releasing Chief Obafemi Awolowo who was serving a prison sentence in Calabar. That Ojukwu should have held back Awolowo to negotiate the isolation of Gowon in the Western Region. The argument was that Ojukwu's position though fragile at the time should have been justified; after all, Awolowo was serving a sentence passed by a competent court in Nigeria. Ojukwu should have used this to win applause in the East and secured for himself a comfortable platform to negotiate for a confederation or the much sought after secession. That if Ojukwu had done this, the Aburi debacle would not have taken place. These and his appointment of Col. Victor Banjo as the commander of the operation to the Mid-Western Region were considered Ojukwu's greatest political mistakes during the civil war.

One of Ojukwu's reasons for refusing to recognize Gowon apart from military seniority which he claimed over him was that the whereabouts of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, the commander in -chief of the armed forces of Nigeria was yet to be determined. If that was so, holding back Awolowo, a man highly respected in the West would have been a good strategy to draw the West to a conference table; to rouse the West to agitate for their destiny within the context of a disintegrating nation.

Furthermore, it was argued that Ojukwu was wrong to let Chief Awolowo have a field day in Nigeria without using his contemporaries like Azikiwe and Okpara. Even when Awolowo was made the Minister of Finance and Vice-Chairman of the Federal Executive Council, there was no clear evidence that Ojukwu was working closely with either Azikiwe or Okpara. Gowon through his deftness put the whole West behind himself and earned the invaluable pieces of advice which only a seasoned politician like Awolowo could give.

There Was a Country had raised so much dust that Achebe's account which did not spare the coup plotters was hardly noticed by his critics and the ugly situation the nation found itself:

There was growing anger and dissatisfaction among officers from Northern Nigeria, who wanted revenge for what they saw as an Igbo coup. Aguiyi Ironsi, a mild -mannered person, was reluctant to execute the Nzeogwu coup plotters, who were serving stiff prison sentences.

Nzeogwu was imprisoned at the Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Lagos. It didn't help matters that all the coup plotters were eventually transferred to the Eastern Prison, which at that time was under the jurisdiction of Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, son of Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu. (Achebe 80)

Achebe also highlighted the misgivings of the Northern leaders at the time which they handed over to Ironsi and they included: "revocation of the unpopular Decree 34; the courts –martial and punishment of the leaders of the January 15, 1966 coup; and the discontinuation of any plans to investigate the underpinnings of the May 1966 massacres in the North" (Achebe 81). Short of blaming Ironsi openly for mismanaging the delicate affair, Achebe argued that if the revenge coup had ended there, where Igbo officers were killed, "the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat" (Achebe 82). The question that occupies one's mind at the end of the book is: How would Achebe's book *There Was a Country* change the bloody history of Nigeria, or better still, change our current primitive and insensitive approach to governance? Assuming the book was not written, how would extant historical, economic and cultural events that keep us where we are today ferret into political finesse and sagacity? Achebe was as helpless as the former Head of State, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in taking an honest historical stand. Obasanjo observes that:

Chukwuma was by nature and upbringing, incapable of planning, let alone executing a coup d'état designed to deliberately suppress one tribe politically and elevate another. But the execution of their plans in the south was susceptible to such an interpretation. He was unhappy about it. He felt disappointed, almost betrayed. There was no intention on Chukwuma's part, to collude or conspire with Ibo officers in the army and with Ibo politicians and academics, to lead a coup for the purpose of ensuring the political leadership of Nigeria by Ibos. No doubt, Ibos and non – Ibos gave a sigh of relief when the coup took place. However, some sections of the Nigerian society saw the coup as a monumental and wholesale Ibo plot to establish Ibo political ascendancy, supremacy and domination. (Nzeogwu 90-1).

Our submission is that Achebe took a personal decision in writing *There Was a Country*; a decision akin to the action of the coup plotters who never consulted widely on when, how and why they stuck at the time they did. It can be stated that for all the imperfections in a book; and a perfect one is yet to be written, there is always something to be learnt even in manifest bias. History will judge Achebe and unfolding political events will reposition *There Was a Country*, and will give Achebe what place to occupy in the political literature of Nigeria; as the blood of martyrs and heroes will never be in vain.

Ojukwu admitted in an interview that the delay by the Biafran authorities in changing the Biafran currency cost the new nation twenty million pounds. If that is so, it is very painful; as painful as the twenty pounds every Easterner received no matter the amount of money he or she deposited in the bank after the civil war.

In trying to conclude this discourse, the growing insecurity in Nigeria and the inability of the component units to coalesce into a virile and united nation have forced Americans to set a target date for a possible breakup of the country in 2015. But the events that prevented the breakup during the civil war will continue to cast a slur on this prediction.

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