

Chinua Achebe, *There Was A Country* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012). 265 pages. ISBN 978-1-59420-482-1. Hardcover. \$29.50.

Very few episodes in Nigerian history have generated more commentaries and reaction in the West than the Nigerian Civil War which occurred between 1967 and 1970. The Nigerian Civil War was a war of secession in which the Eastern part of the country, with the Igbo constituting a majority, and citing political annihilation, attempted to break away from the Nigerian state. Most books on the subject are convinced that the federal government of Nigeria orchestrated a policy of starvation and mass pogrom of the Igbo people simply because the latter wanted to secede from the Nigerian state. Frederick Forsyth's *The Story of Biafra* is a case in point. *There Was A Country* is the latest addition to this stereotyped view of the Nigerian crisis.

Written by Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), a Nigerian novelist, poet, and professor who gained worldwide acclaim with his epochal novel, *Things Fall Apart*, *There Was A Country* is his personal memoir on the Nigerian Civil War. Divided into four parts, the author tries to explicate the intervening factors that led to the war and the nature of the war itself. Part I combines the author's autobiography with the state of the Nigerian political economy before and immediately after independence in 1960. Achebe believes that Nigeria was on the path to glory but things started to get awry when Sir James Robertson, the British who was Nigeria's governor-general at independence, oversaw the election that ushered in their 'anointed son', Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as prime minister of Nigeria – a development that caused political bottlenecks and brickbats as politicians bickered among themselves over the need to gain a foothold on power. Part II examines preparation for the war; preparation that started with the separate positions taken by the Nigerian federal government and the Biafran secessionists on how best to govern the country. The third Part analyzes the nature of the war explaining how Nigeria used starvation to perpetrate 'genocide' of the Ibo. Finally, Part IV assesses Nigeria's political

spectrum after the war. Achebe concludes that Nigeria's problem was that of political leadership that was bereft of ideas.

By arguing in Part II that the Civil War was a planned genocide through starvation after Nigeria had laid siege on the Eastern region, Achebe not only writes about what the West wants to hear, but repeats what others have written on the subject. Indeed, most scholars who have written on the subject and taken the 'genocide' view have done so either out of ignorance or bias. Achebe belongs to the latter category. It is remarkable that Achebe – who was an active participant in the war as an emissary of Odumegwu Ojukwu, the governor of the breakaway Eastern region – allowed his bias to survive his objective frankness. By arguing for a 'Biafran state', Achebe dwells on symptoms without shedding adequate light on causes. As a 'doctor', he fails to properly diagnose the patient's problem but finds himself prescribing drugs for the patient. Whether Achebe finds it arduous or not to rise above his bias on this question is a different subject matter entirely.

A number of issues Achebe raises deserve scrutiny. In his view, Biafra had a right to secede from Nigeria because it had no stake in the latter and had been brutally oppressed. However, he fails to explain that the schisms that resulted in the War were caused by Nigerians, inclusive of the Igbos. The January 1966 coup by a group of hotheaded youth in the Nigerian army, constituted largely of Igbo extractions, galvanised a series of unrest, which ultimately metamorphosed into the civil war. While the January coup was commended by Nigerians because their politicians had become irresponsible, commendation became condemnation after General Aguiyi Ironsi, the Igbo General Officer Commanding (GOC) the Nigerian army raised suspicions of Igbo conspiracy to dominate Nigeria by not trying officers involved in the 1966 coup – officers who had killed Nigeria's leaders from the North, West and Mid-West regions while those from the East were spared – and concurrently turning Nigeria into a unitary state and promoting Igbos to exalted positions. Largely exonerating the Igbos in the prelude to the war is a major shortcoming of this work.

In examining individual and institutional actors that influenced the war, Achebe pours verbal attacks on actors that served as stumbling block to the realisation of the breakaway Biafran dream. Former British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson and U Thant, erstwhile Secretary General of the United Nations were grossly attacked. Western powers, Britain, the United States and Canada were not spared by Achebe as they received damning criticism for aiding and abetting the Nigerian government while finding no justification for their actions.

Its weaknesses notwithstanding, one cannot help but sympathise with Achebe's crusade in the book's conclusion: odious political leadership is leading Nigeria into the abyss. Indeed, Achebe analyses the institutional and societal factors that account for the deep fissures in the Nigerian polity. He particularly bemoans the socio-economic malaise that constantly afflicts the Nigerian landscape: malaise that manifests itself in corruption, ethnic chauvinism, poverty, lawlessness, and indiscipline. In his usual prophetic candour, the author foresaw the "death" (249) of Nigeria if the societal ills are not addressed.

Until his death in March 2013, Achebe practised what he preached. He refused to accept two national awards from successive Nigerian governments because he felt the Nigerian leadership should concentrate on making governance work for the poor rather than engage in vainglorious like conferring awards on eminent Nigerians, which did not improve the country's GDP. This book is a wakeup call to the Nigerian government whose style of leadership is at variance with contemporary governance realities. Although written from the "Biafran standpoint", this book addresses the socio-cultural issues, which continually plagues the unity of the Nigerian state. Written in a simple-styled quintessential prose, the general public will find this book insightful and appealing as it combines Achebe's story with the Nigerian variant of democracy, which can at best be termed, choleric.

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