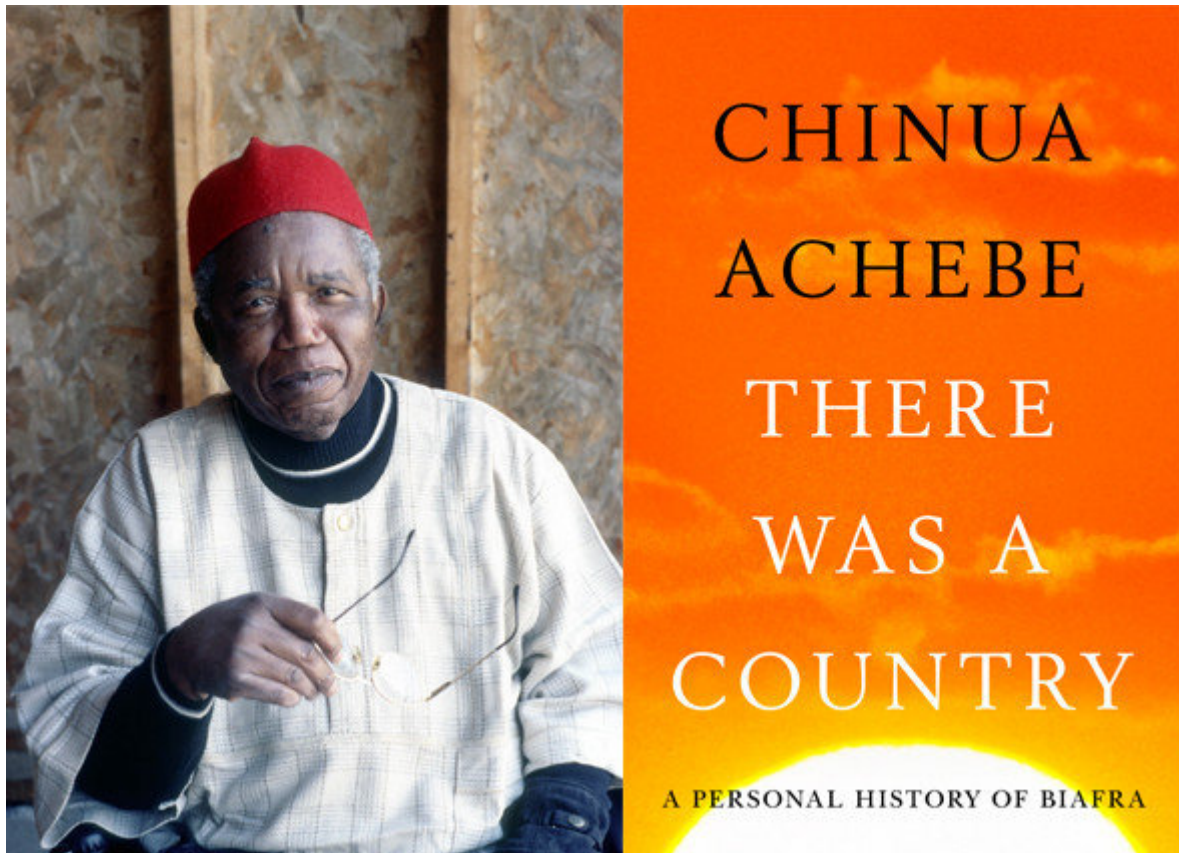


*There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012, pp. 352, ISBN: 1594204829) by Chinua Achebe reviewed by Idowu Olawale (farawale@gmail.com).



This book is the latest in the ever-expanding corpus of books on the Nigerian Civil War otherwise known as the Biafra War. Though biographical in presentation, the book is a study in nation-building in Africa. Divided into four parts, through the personal experiences and reflections of the author, the book traces the history of Nigeria from the Berlin Conference when “Great Britain was handed the area of West Africa that would later become Nigeria, like a piece of chocolate cake at a birthday party” (p.1) to contemporary times. In the course of navigating the history of Nigeria from 1885 to 2012, the book exposes the reader to the childhood and coming of age of the author, his generation’s optimism about their soon to be independent country and the subsequent disillusionment that set in soon after Nigeria’s independence. In parts two and three of the book, the author concerns himself with the politics, the military campaigns, the diplomacy, personalities and humanitarian disasters that dominated the Nigerian Civil War. The part four of the book concerns itself with Nigeria’s forlorn quest for prosperous nationhood after the civil war.

The author however left no one in doubt that the primary focus of the book is on the Nigerian Civil War, a theme he dedicated two parts of the four-part book. Considering the plethora of books that have been written on the subject, one understandably wonder why Achebe felt it necessary to add his voice to the chorus of voices on the subject. Fortunately, he did not leave us in the dark as to his motive for treading the well-worn track of the Nigerian Civil War as he said: “It is for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grandchildren, that I feel it is important to tell Nigeria’s story, Biafra’s story, our story, my story”.

Indeed, Achebe had another new story to tell about the Civil War, which set this book apart from others – genocide. Admittedly, he is not the first writer to focus attention on the issue of genocide and other atrocities perpetrated in the course of the Civil War in Nigeria. In a style that is uniquely his, Achebe succeeded in putting the issue of genocide in the Nigerian Civil War in a different perspective. By the sheer force of his personal integrity, lucidity of his writing, weight of statistical evidence, Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was able to establish the fact that genocide and other atrocities were perpetrated against Easterners by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the prosecution of the Civil War.

Be that as it may, to what extent do the facts as established by Achebe represent the truth of the intention and actions of the Federal Government of Nigeria in prosecuting the Civil War? It is in finding answers to this pertinent question that one begins to see some inconsistencies in the arguments canvassed by Achebe to establish a prima facie case of genocide against the Federal Government of Nigeria in its prosecution of the Civil War. From his presentation of the facts concerning the fate of the masterminds of the January 15, 1966 coup, a coup which set off a chain reaction that culminated in the Civil War, the author betrayed his pro-Igbo bias to informed readers. Whereas the coup plotters, who were Igbo except one, were merely detained for their roles in the January 15 coup, the author on page 80 of the book asserts that: “Aguiyi-Ironsi, a mild-mannered person, was reluctant to execute the Nzeogwu coup plotters, who were serving stiff prison sentences.” Two wrong impressions are cleverly created by the author in this statement. First, the impression is created that General Aguiyi-Ironsi was reluctant to see justice take its course with the coup plotters due mainly to his compassion rather than due to his sympathy for the coup plotters coupled with ethnic group affiliation with most of the coup plotters. More importantly, the author also creates the false impression that Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and his cohorts had been duly tried and sentenced for their roles in the assassination of the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and others, in the course of the January 15, 1966 coup. Nothing, however, could be farther from the truth. All demands for the court-martial of these coup plotters were repeatedly ignored by General Aguiyi-Ironsi, fuelling in the process, the belief that General Aguiyi-Ironsi was bent on shielding them from justice. The conviction that the cause of justice would never be served motivated the bloody July 29, 1966 counter-coup by northern elements within the military. Admittedly, the scope and intensity of the retribution exacted by these Northern troops in their counter-coup was disproportionate to that of January 15, 1966 coup. But this, rather than what the author would have us believe, was what actually happened.

The greatest grouse which the author has against the Federal Government of Nigeria's prosecution of the Civil War was the use of "starvation as a legitimate weapon of war" (p.228). Achebe eloquently argues that by its refusal to countenance the air-lifting of food and medical supplies into Biafra on humanitarian grounds, the Federal Government was only acting out a macabre script to ensure the annihilation of the Igbo through starvation. So it appears. Nonetheless, a close familiarity with the facts of the matter indicate that in reaction to international pressure, General Gowon, the Nigerian head of state offered to open up land routes for the supervised delivery of humanitarian aids to starving Biafran children and women (p. 211). Inexplicably, the Biafran head of state, 'General' Ojukwu turned down this offer insisting that all humanitarian aids into the blockaded Biafran republic must be air-lifted (p. 211). The impasse thus generated ensured that the humanitarian situation in Biafra got worse. However, the author insists on blaming the Federal Government of Nigeria for the horrendous plight of Biafrans that resulted from this impasse. One may wonder why the Federal Government of Nigeria was opposed to the air-lifting of humanitarian supplies into Biafra. The reason for this is not far to seek. It had to do with the tendency of Biafran military authorities to fly in arms and other military supplies disguised as humanitarian aids. Hence, the insistence of Nigerian government on permitting the delivery of humanitarian aids through land routes alone, which were more amenable to checks. Given this well founded and legitimate security concern of Nigeria, 'General' Ojukwu had two options – either to place the humanitarian needs of his people before his desire for military opportunism. It is standing logic on its head to blame the Federal Government of Nigeria for the humanitarian disaster that befell the Igbo people because 'General' Ojukwu chose the latter option. He knew the options before him as well as the opportunity costs of each option. The responsibility for the decision was Ojukwu's not the Federal Government of Nigeria's. The Canadian government along with other informed and objective observers had a similar impression of 'General' Ojukwu as one "that was more interested in getting arms than food or medical supplies..." (p.222).

Curiously, the author would have the world believe otherwise. To what then can one attribute the inconsistencies in the arguments advanced in this book? There are several answers to this question, but a few should suffice. On one hand, is the fact that the author having been scarred by the Civil War, understandably found it hard to narrate the events arising from the Civil War with much degree of objectivity. Evidently, this writing has been clouded by the angst of a man with an axe to grind. Hence, his tendency to bend backward in order to apportion blame where it is not due. This is not to suggest that the Nigerian authorities were not guilty of atrocities against the Igbo in their prosecution of the civil war. But there is a difference between excesses committed by individual field commanders like Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle, Brigadier Murtala Mohammed etc., and a deliberate policy of genocide articulated at the supreme military headquarters and handed down to the rank and file in the frontlines. For somebody of the author's calibre, ignorance could not be responsible for the failure to make this distinction. Presently, no evidence exists of the Federal Government as a corporate entity formulating a policy of genocide in the course of the civil war.

It is to the credit of the author's writing skill and perspective that despite the identified shortcomings of the book, it still remains a seminal work on Nigerian history and nation-building in Africa. However, given the historical inaccuracies, sophistry as well as subjectivity in the book, it is best recommended for informed readers. However, for a book that was written : "...for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grandchildren". , the author has bequeathed a dangerous inheritance for posterity as the young and ignorant run the risk of learning the wrong lessons from the historical events the author has subjectively narrated.

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*Olawale Idowu* is a doctoral candidate at the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, and Assistant Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Osun State University, Osogbo, Osun state, Nigeria. He holds a Bachelors of Arts (Honours) and Master's degrees in History and in History and Diplomacy from Lagos State University. He is an editorial intern, *African Nebula*. His publications include: "Corruption, the Police and the Challenges of Free and Fair Elections in Nigeria", *JSDA*, Winter Issue, 2011, "Gender and the Politics of Exclusion in Pre-colonial Ibadan: An Assessment of Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura", *Journal of Traditions and Beliefs*, No. 1, Vol.2, 2011, "Colonial Rule and the Selection Process of Traditional Rulers: An Assessment of the Odemo and Akran Royal Stools" in Tunde Babawale et al, *The Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria*, Lagos: CBAAC, 2010 as well as "Mainstreaming African Strategic Thought: An Assessment of Pre Colonial Yoruba Strategic Thoughts". The title of his doctoral thesis is *Police-Military Relations in Nigeria, 1960 – 2007*. In 2011, he won the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom Travel Fellowship.