

## LESSONS FROM ACHEBE'S *THERE WAS A COUNTRY*: A PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26514.17604

### ***Abstract***

*There is a growing consensus that Nigeria is heading towards a total collapse. Many reasons account for this: inept leaders, security crises, corruption, lack of accountability, ethnicity, nepotism, mediocrity among others. The root cause of these problems for many critics are the unworkable amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorate by Lugard in 1914; the bad political arrangement instituted by the British at independence; and the unfortunate Nigeria-Biafra war that followed and its aftermaths that has continued to haunt the unity of the country. Whatever the degree of accuracy of these submissions, one thing remains incontrovertible: Nigeria is in deep crises to the point that her future existence is cloudy except effective solutions to her multiple problems are urgently found. Achebe's *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra (TWAC)* is one such attempt to both X-ray the issues dogging Nigeria's progress and to proffer solutions. It focuses majorly on the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, its profound importance in understanding the current crises in Nigeria and the need to ask the proper questions and to draw the right inferences so as to save Nigeria from being recorded in history as 'there was a country.' This study identifies with Achebe's project by carrying out a philosophical review on the lessons the war provides using Achebe's TWAC as the source material. The purpose is to situate the lessons in a way that they will act as invaluable guide in understanding Nigeria's past and present crises and how best to negotiate the future with hope.*

**Key words:** Achebe, *There Was a Country*, Philosophy, Nigeria, Lessons

## **Introduction: Reviewing a Personal History Philosophically**

In order to evaluate a personal account philosophically the following issues should be considered:

One, is the author a reliable witness? Achebe was intimately connected with the war beginning with the coup that led to it. The publication of his new novel *A Man of the People* which prophetically ended with a coup coincided with the actual January 15, 1966 coup. This turned him into a suspect and a hunted man by the military. He experienced first-hand the hounding of Igbos out of Lagos (Achebe, 2012:70-71) and the bombing of his house in Enugu (p.182). In Biafra he served in many committees: he was a member of the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) tasked with the responsibility of improving the overall relationship between the Biafran army and the people it served and on whose behalf it fought; a member of a political committee entrusted with working out how best the new nation will survive the war and establish itself as a nation to be reckoned with among other nations (pp.143-4); the chairman of the National Guidance Committee with the task of writing a constitution for Biafra which resulted in the production of the Ahiara Declaration (pp.144-5). In addition, he travelled as ambassador for Biafra (pp.160-167, 213); and had the privilege of reading Ifeajuna's (one of the master minds of the January 15, 1966 coup) manuscript on the coup (pp.178-179). Also he experienced life as a refugee moving from one town to another during the war (pp.188-194; 200); and the war claimed the life of, perhaps, his irreplaceable friend and one of the best poets of all times, Christopher Okigbo (pp.114, 183-185). Even with all these, what can memory hold and for how long? Ngugi (2010:67) wonders why one can 'recall some events and characters vividly and others not at all? How is the mind able to select what it buries deep in the memory and what it allows to float on the surface?' In his autobiographical novel, *Tell Freedom*, Peter Abrahams (1954:12) observes that there are memories that one could remember for the rest of one's life. For him there 'are sharp, clear-cut flashes of memory.' Perhaps the memory of the war is like that for Achebe. In a Forward, in Byrne's (1997:7) *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade*, Frederick Forsyth states: 'For those intimately involved in the fighting and the suffering, it remains a scar that will never fade.' Achebe clearly has a deep intimacy with the fighting and suffering.

Two, is it possible for a personal account to maintain an objective mental distance, be free of self-interest and other inputs from one's prejudice, experience, values and so forth. Isaak (1975:7) notes that '[i]n a complex world like ours, to be able to view a political situation without distortion is hard, perhaps impossible....For at times all of us perceive the world through static snapshots and are too rigid to grasp the quick changes of the complex reality we

are experiencing.’ For him facts are not ‘just facts pure and simple. Facts are pre-selected and pre-interpreted on the basis of certain value assumptions and on the basis of certain human interests’ (p.261). Okolo (2017:190) submits that ‘[e]xperience, values, background knowledge, prejudice, proximity or otherwise to an issue/situation no doubt play a significant role in the interpretation we give to a situation.’ Our upbringings, culture, loyalty, exposure, inevitably come into our understanding of any situation. Some of the key elements needed to render an unbiased account of any given situation are our ability to interrogate events and our depth of critical thinking.

Three, are there ways of evaluating the author’s account? One way is to assess the report of other reliable sources on the same subject. Here other critical works such as Soyinka’s (2009) *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, Gould’s (2012) *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, Alabi-Isama’s (2013) *The Tragedy of Victory: On-the-Spot Account of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre*, Byrne’s (1997) *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade*, Ezeani’s (2013) *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot* among others will be used to evaluate Achebe’s position. Besides, Achebe conducted extensive research. He consulted hundreds of references, held conversations with reliable sources and, even, got an eminent journalist and writer, Pini Jason, to interview the former Nigerian head of state during the war, General Yakubu Gowon.

Four, in case of disagreement does it arise because the backgrounds of the authors differ such that each writer perceives events from the prism of their location? Are the disagreements the outcome of differing ideological persuasions of the authors? Sprout and Sprout (1983:14) note that ‘[i]deologies have long been recognized as formidable instruments of psychological penetration.’ Isaak (1975:41) cautions against the dark side of ideology – the pathology it breeds: ‘the belief in a rigid image of reality that is too simplistic to correspond to actual reality.’ Concerning the nature of ideology, he observes that ‘the very nature of ideology demands that it freezes, or reify, certain aspects of social facts to the point of excluding other aspects’ (p.68). In spite of the fact that most of the reliable sources mentioned above do not share Achebe’s cultural background, they share his view on the major issues dogging Nigeria’s progress. Among the major issues are the mishandling of the affairs that led to the Nigeria-Biafra war and the role of amalgamation in making Nigeria an unworkable project.

Five, does the author handle issues that portray his interest in a bad light? Among the three maxims of criticism of Herodotus, according to Oost (1963:445), two are pertinent: ‘one should exercise extreme care in trying to harmonize conflicting bits of evidence; and the historian should, if possible, see for himself,

and use eyewitness testimony rather than hearsay.’ Reporting on whether Banjo betrayed Biafra with his mishandling of the invasion of the Mid-West, Achebe (p.128-132) presents other sources that suggest that Banjo may not be as guilty as charged. On the second maxim identified by Herodotus, Achebe saw for himself and made use of eyewitness testimony. He recounts how on his visit to a Biafran war clinic he saw patients strewn on the floor, the air thick with ‘smell of vomit, diarrhea, and other bodily fluids that are kept private in sunnier times’ (p.194) and he spent some time with ‘this reed-thin child, with a skull capped with wiry rust-colored tufts of hair and a body centered on a protuberant stomach’ whose ‘touch was as light as feathers’ (p.195). On August, 12, 1968 he witnessed a debate on the Biafran issue in the British House of Commons which gave him the impression that if the British government was largely unmoved by the Biafran tragedy, ordinary people were outraged’ (pp.213-214).

Six, does the author allow for enough time perspective to be able to adequately interpret what happened? Was he able to avoid the danger of turning a complex historical reality into a single narrative? Did he go back far enough historically to examine the starting points and their overall implications? Achebe’s *TWAC* was published in 2012, forty-five years after the Nigeria-Biafra war started and forty-two years after it ended. Both in the life of an individual and a nation those are significant number of years. Gowon and Ojukwu who led the war on Nigerian side and Biafran side respectively were in their thirties. Gowon was thirty-two; Ojukwu thirty-three. Dubai went from desert backwater with the discovery of oil in 1966 to a modern metropolis and a tourist destination within forty-five years. Also, the publishers of the book noted on the cover flap that the book is a ‘marriage of history and memoir, vivid first-hand observation and decades of further research and reflection.’ Indeed, Achebe’s account fits in with Sigmund Freud’s discussion on psychoanalysis that we make sense of an experience not in the moment of living it, but retrospectively, in the calm of *remembering*, reviewing the past. In addition, Achebe started his account over a period of ‘four to five hundred years ago, from the “discovery” of Africa by Europe, through the transatlantic slave trade, to the Berlin Conference of 1885’ (p.1) to the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 which ‘inextricably complicated Nigeria’s destiny’(p.2).

Finally, how possible is it to write an account of war given all that war entails? In his reconstruction of the trial and imprisonment of Jomo Kenyetta and the heroic exploits of Dedan Kimathi, Ngugi (2010:195) admits that ‘[he is] not sure if [he] was able truly to capture the intricate web of the mundane and the dramatic, the surreal normality of ordinary living under extraordinary times in a country at war.’ In such times he claims that ‘the real and the surreal were one.’ The point

is, writing about war is extremely difficult. Creveld (2009:320) in fact, wonders 'How does one put onto the printed page the pain felt by those who have their bodies perforated, their limbs broken or crushed or torn off? How does one make one's readers smell the burned flesh and hear the screams?' Yet, when Achebe writes that there was 'Blood, Blood, Everywhere' (p136) and that 'at the end of the thirty-month war Biafra was a vast smoldering rubble' (p.227) one cannot help but *see* what he meant. And when he tells us that 'the air was heavy with odors of diarrhea,/ Of unwashed children with washed-out ribs/ And dried-up bottoms waddling in labored steps/ Behind blown-empty bellies' (p.168) it conveys a *vivid* plight of kwashiorkor-inflicted children. And when describing the effect of the starvation policy he writes that 'Bodies lay rotting under the hot sun by the roadside, and the flapping wings of scavengers could be seen circling, waiting, watching patiently nearby' (p.210) and that vultures 'picked the eyes of a swollen/ corpse in a water-logged/ trench and ate the/ things in its bowel' (p.204) we can *identify* with the hopelessness of the dying. It evokes the plight of the little Sudanese girl in the picture titled 'the vulture and the little girl' captured for posterity by the lens of the photojournalist, Kevin Carter, in 1993 during the Sudanese civil war. More importantly, it helps to understand the torture that led Carter to commit suicide in 1994 after winning the Pulitzer Prize for the photo.

These issues are not the only ones which may be raised (Okolo, 2017). They are, however, important in providing the required guide for a philosophical review of the text by extracting vital lessons from it that will help to properly situate the root causes of Nigeria's crises and how best to negotiate the future with hope.

### **Text Summary**

TWAC is the author's account of the Biafra – Nigeria war that started in July 6, 1967 and ended with Biafra's surrender in January 15, 1970. In giving this account, Achebe provided background history going as far back as the "discovery" of Africa by Europe, the transatlantic slave trade, the Berlin Conference of 1885, to the amalgamation of Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914 which 'inextricably complicated Nigeria's destiny' by forcing over 250 ethnic groups, distinct languages, diverse cultures and different religions into a *doomed* union. These helped to situate the events that both preceded and followed the ill-conceived January 15, 1966 coup: the Nigerian census crisis of 1963-64; the Western Nigeria election crisis of 1965; the July 1966 counter coup by

Northern Nigerian officers and the progressive pogrom of the Igbos that continued; the January 4-5, 1967 Aburi Accord and Gowon's refusal to honour it; the May 27, 1967 dividing of the nation into twelve states by Gowon; the May 30, 1967 proclamation of the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria by Ojukwu; the July 6, 1967 declaration of war on Biafra by Nigeria; and the January 15, 1970 surrender of Biafra. Importantly, for Achebe, the moment has come for Nigerians and the world to ask the proper questions and draw the right inferences about what happened in those terrible years.

The core concerns of Achebe's book seem to have a two-fold mandate. One, to draw attention to the root cause of Nigeria's crises of value; and two to underscore that a country that is trapped in its past has no future and that for Nigeria to survive and to claim the future with confidence there is need to *look* the past in the face, identify where 'the rain began to beat [us]' (p.1), admit the errors, do proper restitution where necessary, and forge new ways of engineering national consciousness, new ways of cooperation where merit will be the abiding principle and practice. In sum, *TWAC* forces two cardinal reflections on us: first, how did Lugard's 1914 *contraption* become a *divine* mandate? Second, to rationally acknowledge the possibilities (protest, revolution, secession, war on one hand, and peace, unity, tolerance and cooperation on the other) that can occur if the Nigerian project is not (or is) given the desired attention for its continued survival. The book prods the reader to reflect on the highest good a country (Nigeria) should seek.

## Lessons

A war that entered into every part of Biafran life, lasted for thirty months, and has continued to define events in Nigeria's socio-political landscape should leave invaluable instructions. *TWAC* directs attention to the fact that in real terms Nigeria has not learnt any penetrating lesson from the war. Achebe sees the brutal killing of Igbo people and the condoning of it as both a negation of civilization and a clear sabotage on the solidarity of Nigeria as a nation. He believes that currently there appear to be enough ethnic, economic and political pressures that can push the country over the edge except the lessons from the war are taken seriously. What lessons did the war leave behind?

One, the war teaches that the devastating effect of war is such that every effort should be directed at achieving conflict resolution. Achebe insists that the first coup might have been averted if Nigerian leaders had approached their duty

with humility because there were enough signs that the country was in deep trouble. Even at that, when the coup happened, instead of trying to salvage the situation it was allowed to degenerate by allowing ethnic and religious coloration to drive the situation until it snowballed into the civil war. Writing on life in Biafra, Achebe (p.169) notes that the 'Nigeria-Biafra conflict created a humanitarian emergency of epic proportions....As hunger and thirst grew, so did despair, confusion, and desperation. Most were heading in whatever direction the other was headed, propelled by the latest rumors of food and shelter spreading through the multitude like a virus.' Further he informs that following 'the blockade imposed by the Nigerian government, "Biafra" became synonymous with the tear-tugging imagery of starving babies with blown-out bellies, skulls with no subcutaneous fat harboring pale, sunken eyes in sockets that betrayed their suffering.'

Apart from the huge loss suffered by the Biafrans in terms of lives and properties, Achebe (195) reports 'another epidemic that was not talked about much, a silent scourge - the explosion of mental illness: major depression, psychosis, schizophrenia, manic-depression, personality disorders, grief response, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, etc.- on a scale none of us had ever witnessed.' For him one of the saddest images of the war was not just the dead and the physically wounded but also the mentally scarred, the mad people who had been psychologically devastated by the anguish and myriad pressures of war and who walk about aimlessly in tattered clothes, in conversation with themselves. This psychological torment is not restricted to losers. Onuoha (2020:14) reports that General Ibrahim Babangida, who fought on the Nigerian side, recalls that having to fight some of his good colleagues on the Biafran side during the war was 'a very horrible and pathetic experience for [him]....' Achebe insists that the 'suffering and humanitarian disaster left in the wake of war's destruction goes on long after the weapons are silenced - for months and years' (p.227). In the case of Nigeria, a new era of great decadence and decline started at the end of the war and continued to this day (p.243).

In terms of the huge deficit of the war, Achebe's remarks are significant. The war left the country deeply fragmented, fragile and unstable. The lack of feeling of a strong attachment to the state by the different ethnicities which was a major cause of the war has continued. Okigbo (1987:9) observes that civil wars are 'notorious for the long term scars they create and the crisis of values they generate.' For him there is no other situation created by man that is more exactly calculated to debase any existing system of values than war. Further, commenting on Biafran people he notes that the 'crisis of values was perhaps more noticeable in our own part of the country which served as battle ground for

the civil war and served as the testing ground for new monetary and financial policy immediately after the war....A restless, energetic and sensitive people had become schizophrenic, yearning simultaneously for isolation from, as well as integration with Nigeria' (p.13).

Two, while war can start as a result of peoples consent, its life span can easily be determined by the leaders. Achebe attributes part of the war's longevity to 'the internal rivalries that existed between Gowon and Ojukwu' (p.123) and their obsessive tendency 'to seek positions of strength and avoid looking weak throughout the conflict' (p.124). Achebe also reports that some people believe that Gowon and Ojukwu were 'blinded by ego' and obsessed with 'interpersonal competition and petty rivalries.' As a consequence, they 'failed to make appropriate and wise decisions throughout the conflict and missed several opportunities when compromise could have saved the day' (p.123). Isaak (1975) cautions against the popular believe that collectivities determine political actions. He maintains that the danger of not believing that 'strong leaders can and do exist in world politics is that the masses of people in the world will be conditioned to believe that political events are inevitable, that history makes history, not men, and that individual human beings are no longer responsible for their own political actions' (p.xi). Soyinka (2009) reports that during his meeting with Ojukwu to persuade him to rethink the secession although Ojukwu tried to convince him that what was happening was based on the mood of Igbo people, he found it difficult to accept. For him, 'Ojukwu himself had played a role in manipulating emotions' (p.128). Awoyokun (2013:16) quotes Klaus W. Stephen as stating that Ojukwu possessed two characteristics that are not realised by many people for a long time: 'his greed for power and his ability to charm and enchant the masses: a demagogue.' Care should be taken in the selection of leaders given that it is men that make history. As such it is easy for a person to be carried away with the sense of his importance and a desire to perpetuate his immortality. Achebe quotes Ralp Uwechue as stating that in 'Biafra two wars were fought simultaneously. The first was for the survival of the Ibos [sic] as a race. The second was for the survival of Ojukwu's leadership. Ojukwu's error, which proved fatal for millions of Ibos [sic], was that he put the latter first' (p.125). Leadership at the best of time is a very serious issue. In war situations, it is doubly so.

The number three lesson, then, is the centrality of leadership to the development of any nation. It is probable that with the right leadership the Biafra-Nigeria war would not have happened. To begin with, a national tension that will degenerate into bloodshed is always palpable; it builds up over a considerable length of time. What did the federal government do to prevent the bloodbath of 1966?



Achebe writes that '[a]s we reached the brink of full-blown war it became clear...that the chaos enveloping all of us in Nigeria was due to the incompetence of the Nigerian ruling class' (69). He puts this down to their poor grasp of history and inability to appreciate and grapple with Nigeria's ethnic and political complexity. Further, he informs that when the Igbo people 'noticed that the federal government of Nigeria did not respond to [their] call to end the pogroms, [they] concluded that a government that failed to safeguard the lives of its citizens has no claim to their allegiance and must be ready to accept that the victims deserve the right to seek their safety in other ways – including secession' (p.95). This inability to manage the crisis on the part of the federal government led to the war. Crisis management requires a great deal of administrative experience which Gowon did not possess at that time. *This Day* newspaper of October 2, 2020 reports that while speaking at Nigeria's first Virtual reality history competition, Gowon admits that he never planned to be the head of state, that his emergence was accidental and that he 'felt petrified when [he] took over as Head of State.' In fact, some of the worst atrocities of the war were committed without Gowon's knowledge. Both the Asaba massacre of October 1967 led by Haruna and the Aba gruesome killings of August, 1968 led by Colonel Adekunle were actions Gowon did not order. Achebe (p.134) quotes Gowon as stating that he was made ignorant of the Asaba massacre as it was something he would not have approved of in whatsoever. In fact, he claimed to have learnt of it when it appeared in the papers. Indeed, Gould (2012:143) quotes him as stating that '[h]e was deeply distressed that people thought that [he] even considered genocidal action towards the Igbo. It never even entered [his] thought process.' This introduces a dangerous twist to the role of a leader. Leadership calls for stern qualities such as providing clear guidance that has to be followed, nurturing and sustaining excellence in the led, inspiring confidence and courage in the people and providing an environment where integrity and accountability are upheld as timeless principles among others. Gowon's admission of being kept in the dark by his subordinates especially given the weighty nature of the issue can only be accounted for in the light of a troubling abdication of leadership. Leaders, then, should always remind themselves that while orders flow downward, information do not necessarily flow upward. A seasoned leader will have to put efficient strategy in place to be able to effectively monitor the activities of subordinates, particularly, their excesses.

Four, the nature of war is such that trust should remain fragile. Biafra's fortune during the war took a downward plunge following Victor Banjo's handling of the Mid-West operation. Gould (2012:71) notes that 'Ojukwu's ascendant position was undermined by Banjo's treachery, allowing Gowon to take the

initiative and force Biafra on the defensive.’ He goes further to report that Ojukwu admitted that ‘his own lack of trust and his doubts about loyalty within the military stemmed from the time when he had put much faith in Lt. Col. Victor Banjo and Biafra’s invasion of the Mid-West’ (p.92). According to Achebe against ‘protests in certain Biafra military quarters, Ojukwu brought Victor Banjo into the statehouse at Enugu as one of his close military confidants and advisers’ (p.130). Gould (2012) quotes Leapman as noting that in addition to undermining Ojukwu’s faith, Banjo’s treachery also started the rumours of saboteurs. What Ojukwu should remember is that ‘ontological trust’ is an *extremely* delicate venture. Bohme (2012:59) sees ontological trust as the form of trust that ‘has its roots in the presumption that things, people and institutions are good *in themselves*.’ He cautions that in ‘relationships, trust means always giving the other the benefit of the doubt and, above all, a willingness to open oneself to the possibility of being disappointed...’(p.61). Further, he insists that because trust ‘acknowledges the other in his spontaneous subjective being, trust in one’s dealings with others implies consciously giving up a degree of security’ (p.61). War typically strikes at the core of the principle of fidelity which is a significant value and an important yardstick of trust-building behaviour in interaction with others. Paradoxically, without trust it is difficult to make meaningful progress and the internal cohesion that should act to strengthen morale and reinforce group solidarity - the all-important factors necessary for winning a war - are destroyed. The Bible puts it aptly: a house divided against itself cannot stand. What is called for, then, is the ability to evaluate potential allies for their trustworthiness knowing that surprise and deceit will always be important components of war strategy. For instance, Achebe notes that ‘Victor Banjo, it was widely known, was not in favor of Ojukwu’s secessionist aspirations but favored a solution to Nigeria’s problems that would result in the “deamalgamation” of the country back into Southern and Northern Nigeria’ (p.130). Importantly, Ojukwu was warned about Banjo’s possible lack of undivided loyalty. Here, apart from trust, the inability to accommodate other views, as shown by Ojukwu’s action, greatly undermined Biafra’s cause.

Five, the war demonstrates that when the gap between present reality and futuristic ideal becomes too wide, reality will not be able to retain a *clear* focus on the ideal. Understanding the psychological power of ethnicity and how to utilise situational and historical opportunity, perhaps, enabled Ojukwu to consolidate his power among the Igbos. However, not recognising the limits of the endurance of his people and the extent of his political clout led Ojukwu to avoidable blunders and ultimate defeat. Achebe notes that ‘Azikiwe supporters allege that the refusal by Ojukwu to consider many peaceful strategies to end the

conflict, coupled with the prospects of annihilation of his people, was...just too much for the “great Zik of Africa” to bear’ (p.216-217). Gould (2012:116), based on his interview with Lt.Col. Achuzia and his reading of De St Jorre, concludes that Azikiwe’s influence ‘should not be underestimated and it can be argued that from this date the seeds of disenchantment with Ojukwu within the small ruling political elite were sown, and Ojukwu’s political base was irretrievably undermined.’ Perhaps, in all greatness there is a flaw.

Six, the war acts as a caution to African countries to be wary of foreign interest in their affairs. Achebe claims that oil interests and competition between Britain, France, and the United States played a far more important role in the war than the “unified Nigeria” argument given by Gowon for declaring war on Biafra. To begin with, there is a sense in which the war would never have occurred if not for Britain’s interference. Soyinka (2009:113) reports that after the first military coup of January 15, 1966, the North had raised the shout of *araba* – secession. However, ‘[a]ctively prodded by the British government, the North gradually abandoned its secessionist agenda – *you have the whole cake in your hands* – the High Commissioner admonished Gowon. *Why do you wish to settle for half?*’ Grasping the whole cake without reflecting on how it will impact on others left *empty handed* inevitably propelled events that led to the war and provided the theatre for world powers to exercise their might. For instance, according to Ezeani (2013:136) ‘Nigeria’s blockade of Biafra would not have resulted in such a tragic situation had Britain as a major international power not played a crucial role.’ Ojukwu (1969:6) notes that ‘sponsorship of Nigeria by white imperialism has not been disinterested.’ Achebe quotes Michael Leapman’s report as stating that ‘Cabinet papers for [1967]...show how the decision to continue arming Nigeria was not based on arguments for or against secession, or on the interests of its people, but on backing the likely winner’ and that the ‘sole immediate British interest is to bring the [Nigerian] economy back to a condition in which [their] substantial trade and investment can be further developed’ (p.99). Complaining about Britain’s duplicity during the war, a British Captain, Gerry Healy, confessed to Byrne (1997:155), ‘we’ve flown here with food and medicines for Biafrans. Now we’ve to fly back to London as soon as we can to carry a cargo of bombs – to prevent the same relief supplies landing at Uli.’ On the events leading to the civil war Soyinka (2009:113) remarks that the ‘British government acting through its High Commissioner had long committed itself to a military dominated agenda, as long as it was led from the North.’ It was for this reason that Soyinka advised Ojukwu against secession. He notes that his objection to Biafra’s secession was from a practical point of view because he doubted Biafra’s ability to survive the inevitable onslaught from the Federal side (p.121).

Predictably, during the war the 'Biafrans were completely outgunned compared to the Nigerians' because 'The Soviet Union and Britain not only supplied Nigeria with brand-new MIG-17 and II-28 Beagle (Ilyushin) jets but also with Soviet T-34 battle tanks, anti-aircraft guns, AK-47 rifles, machine guns, grenades, mines, bombs, etc' (Achebe, 2012:154). Ojukwu (1969:7) warns that it 'is not Russia's intention to make Nigeria a better place for Nigeria or indeed any other part of Africa a better place for Africans. Her interest is strategic.' Writing on Rwanda's genocide, Melvern (2009:29) notes that 'Rwanda's violent divisions might have been easier to heal and its tragic history somewhat different had it not been for the involvement of outside interests.' Indeed, Achebe insists that 'the callous interference of the great powers led to great despair and a prolongation of the tragedy' (p.105).

Yet, there is a paradoxical side to this. Where genuine outside help is needed it is often not given. Achebe laments that if the United Nations had 'been more involved, there would not have been as many atrocities, as much starvation, as much death' (p.212). He sees the silence of the United Nations as significant reason for the reckless abandon with which the federal government of Nigeria massacred the people of Biafra. According to him in 'February 1969 alone nearly eight hundred civilians were massacred by targeted Nigerian air force strikes on open markets near Owerri' (p.212) in total disregard for the Geneva Convention resolutions describing civilian safe havens. Even Nnamdi Azikiwe's fourteen-point peace plan on how to resolve the conflict which was contained in a speech he delivered at Oxford University on February 16, 1969 and 'submitted to both United Nations officials and the federal government of Nigeria, was soundly rejected as "unworkable"' (p.215). Achebe reminds that 'many of Azikiwe's strategies and suggestions - international conflict resolution with United Nations peacekeeping forces, the use of international observer teams and military personnel to complement existing resources on the ground, etc. - have become standard United Nations practices today' (p.215). Achebe insists that since the West has had a long engagement with Africa, it must share the weight of Africa's historical burden by demonstrating 'goodwill and concerted efforts' (p.2) in finding a meaningful solution to Africa's problems. He suggests that the West has a duty to support African nations in their struggles to become viable democracies (p.247).

Seven, the war teaches that gaining and retaining international sympathy imposes a moral rectitude. 'One of the silver linings of the conflict,' according to Achebe 'was the international media's presence throughout the war' (p.199). This worked in Biafra's favour in drawing international attention to the war's brutality and the need for international intervention to 'address the humanitarian

disaster overwhelming the children of Biafra.’ This support was greatly undermined when Biafra executed eleven foreign oil workers and detained eighteen foreign oilmen. Byrne (1997:131) captures the rupture in the emotional and moral support that Biafra had hitherto enjoyed this way: ‘Ojukwu must understand that international image of Biafra has deteriorated considerably since the oilmen were killed and the death sentence imposed on the others....It’s difficult now to raise funds for the airlift. People say that the Biafrans are oppressors and we’ll have to discontinue the airlift if more donors withdraw their support.’ Achebe sums the situation this way: ‘As a people proclaiming victimization at the hands of Nigeria, and rightfully so, we could not be seen as victimizers in any situation or setting, in order to continue receiving the widespread moral and humanitarian support we needed to survive. This failure to recognize this fundamental principle...contributed immensely to the downturn in Biafra’s fortunes’ (p.220). Ojukwu (1969), however, sees the situation differently. For him the issue is racial. He pointed to the attitude of the civilized world to Biafran plight. He noted that while Europe paid no attention to some 50,000 Biafrans slaughtered like cattle in 1966 in Nigeria, the over one million Biafrans who have been killed in the cause of the war, the murder of the entire male population of a village by Nigerian troops, the entire world threatens to stop ‘because a handful of white men collaborating with the enemy were caught.’ He wonders ‘How many black dead make one missing white?...Is it infinity?’ (p.2). To the extent this contributed in the final defeat of Biafra will remain a matter of historical speculation.

Eight, is the importance of a strong civil society. Achebe reports that without private nongovernmental agencies and individuals, the proof of the wartime atrocities would have been lost. Individuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Francois Maurice and John Lennon made public statements condemning the war while peaceful protests to draw American public attention to the conflict was carried out by British and American artists. Achebe claims that Henry Kissinger ‘found himself encouraging the Nixon administration to rethink their policy on the Nigeria-Biafra conflict ‘because of heavy pressure from civil society groups’ (p.140). Equally in Britain ‘antipathy among the British public grew sufficiently as the conflict progressed to threaten the British Labor government’s election chances’ (p.100). It got to the point that ‘British dockworkers reportedly refused to load ships with British arms heading for Lagos, protesting that they were being used to kill “Biafran babies”’ (p.101).

Nine, the war teaches that no matter how grand or idealistic a notion is without a comprehensive understanding of what it entails and adequate preparation the success hangs in the air. What spurred young talented Igbo colonels to an act of

potential suicide: a country with a great hope and future or a mirage? Apart from being labelled one in Lugard's design, what core attributes and interest do these different ethnicities share that will help them withstand the impact of a coup, without reading ethnic meaning into it? Did they adequately consider the feudal system in the North and what the death of their leaders like the Sarduna of Sokoto and the Prime Minister Tafewa Balewa would cause? This was the reason given for the uncontrollable killing of the Igbos in the North following the coup. According to Alabi-Isama (2013:299) Lt. Col. Abubakar explains it this way: 'The first coup killed all our Hausa leaders and military officers...Since we were leaderless, everyone was to himself...In the absence of a leader, there was anarchy and that was what caused whatever happened at the time.' More importantly, irrespective of whether the coup fails or succeeds, how do they think the killing of mostly the northern political and military leaders will be interpreted in a coalition government in which the East and the Midwest were also represented? Placing natural affiliation on the same scale as political affiliation on which side will the balance tilt? Achebe remarks that 'by killing Sir Ahmadu Bello, Nzeogwu and the other coup plotters had put themselves on a collision course with the religious, ethnic, and political ramifications of such an action, something they had clearly not taught through sufficiently' (p.79). Again, it is clear that they did not seriously reckon with Britain's response should the coup boomerang and result into a war, as it did. What, then, in real terms did the coup achieve? Achebe quotes Okechukwu Ikejiani as stating that 'anybody with an intellect, with a sense would consider carefully the implications of a war. War is destructive. There's no country that went to war that didn't suffer, not one. When we went to war, we destroyed everything we had' (p.216). In, perhaps, treating Nigeria's independence as settled and permanent, the coup plotters did not see its fragility which the aftermaths of the coup exposed. They did not realise that there was no *one* Nigeria as such.

Ten, war has the capacity to twist minds and bring out the extreme dark side of people. Creveld (2009:112) puts it this way 'whatever its precise sources, quite often the joy of destruction and killing is carried to extremes. It is entirely capable of making an otherwise reasonable and well-balanced person to take leave of his senses.' Achebe criticised 'starve them into submission policy' of Nigeria that resulted in mass-starvation of Biafran men, women and, especially, children (p.210). He credits Obafemi Awolowo as the architect of the policy and regards a statement attributed to him that 'all is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war' as the 'most callous and unfortunate' (p.210). 'Unfortunate' and 'callous' as Achebe deems the statement it, nevertheless, captures succinctly the core of war. Creveld (2009:127) spells it this way: 'Those

who engaged in it [war] still took leave of the world, with all the psychological consequences that this entails, and they still found themselves in a sphere where, since “because of” and “in order to” do not apply, there is a kind of freedom perhaps not found anywhere else.’ Perhaps Awolowo clearly understood that idealistic notion is not what war is about. Wars are fought to be won. Creveld (2009:127) quotes Nietzsche as stating that victory in war still remained the best cure for the soul. Soyinka’s (2009:135-136) account of Anthony Enahoro’s attitude to his incarceration further highlights this point. In his capacity as the Commissioner for Information for the Nigerian government during the war Enahoro read out to the international press a fabrication of ‘confessional statement’ made by Soyinka. When he was later accosted by Soyinka’s friend, Femi Johnson, who not only challenged the fabrication but also reminded Enahoro of the voluntary role that Soyinka played in the efforts to prevent Enahoro’s extradition, Enahoro dismissed it as ‘Oh, that was then. This is war....The rules are different’. Soyinka notes that ‘[c]uriously [he] found [himself] in agreement with Tony Enahoro – it *was* war.’

Creveld (2009:1) reminds that there is a world of difference between what war is in theory and in reality. In theory, war is a means ‘to an end, a rational, if very brutal, activity intended to serve the interests of one group of people by killing, wounding, or otherwise incapacitating those who oppose that group.’ In reality war is ‘a matter of life and death. In it, every means is fair and practically every method permitted to say nothing of the shortages and deprivations it entails, along with some of the most intense suffering men can endure’ (p.20). Carello (2014:84) quotes Pope Francis as referring to war as ‘madness’ and ‘the suicide of the human race.’ In Okigbo’s (1987) view, war is the only situation created by men that is exactly calculated to debase any existing system of values. To put everything in perspective, the use of blockades on food and humanitarian aid act as a valuable war tactic. Wars are not famous for ideals and ethical considerations. The connection between action and its effects on human welfare are often not weighed on moral scales. Undoubtedly exposure to war affects one’s balance. Taking cognisance of this is important if the behaviour of men in war and battle can be understood. Byrne (1997:40) notes that in an ‘effort to force surrender, Nigeria set up a total blockade by land, sea and air.’ More importantly it allows the painful conclusion that the horrors are somehow justified. As such it is important that before embarking on war or allowing oneself to be dragged into it that its extremities are carefully considered.

Yet to uphold such conclusion will be to give a carte-blanche to war to legitimise human extremities. Besides, a bad example often helps to introduce a worse event and gradually build up to a worst situation. The Biafran example may

have acted as a booster to what happened in Rwanda. Writing on the Rwandan genocide Melvern (2009:6) reports that the ‘killing was vicious, relentless and incredibly brutal. It took place in broad daylight. Far from trying to conceal what was happening the perpetrators and organizers of the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi remained secure in the knowledge that there would be little international condemnation and that outside interference would be at a minimum.’ Ezeani (2013) believes that the mishandling of the Biafran genocide was majorly responsible for what happened in Rwanda and other African countries. He quotes Ikeazor as stating that by seeing off two million Biafrans ‘to their graves by starvation, bullets, bombs and by organised massacres, the Nigerians responsible – especially the army officers and rampaging mobs in the North got off very lightly. No one was tried or convicted for murder, genocide or war crimes. The signal was therefore sent that Africans can be killed or done to death in such numbers with impunity’ (p.57). Achebe, in fact, attributes the rise of the militant Islamist sect Boko Haram to the fact that for ‘over half a century the federal government has turned a blind eye to waves of ferocious and savage massacres of its citizens – mainly Christian Southerners; mostly Igbos or indigenes of the Middle Belt; and others – with impunity’ (p.251). Okigbo (1987:11) reminds that history is ‘recursive, we go through similar situations from time to time, again and again.’ Soyinka (2020) predicts that Nigeria is teetering on the very edge of total collapse due to worsening insecurity challenges under the leadership of President Buhari. TWAC directs attention as well as act as an indictment to leaders on the dangers of neglecting and not learning from history. Still it is important to remember as Achebe urges us that ‘the Geneva Conventions were instituted after the Holocaust to make sure that human rights are still protected in times of conflict’ (p.235).

### **Deductions: Nigeria’s Survival**

TWAC invites stocktaking and serious reflection on the meaning of our collective existence and Nigeria’s future survival. Three assumptions, at least, support this.

First, strengthening the regions is a matter of *political necessity* if the shift from *power politics* to politics of commitment is to be achieved. Achebe deplors a situation where the president ‘has all of the power and resources of the country in his control’ and ‘selects who should be probed or not’ (p.252). Given this kind of power the presidential election is usually a ‘do or die’ affair. Regional coexistence system will undermine the primacy of the issue of who becomes the president and thereby decrease the dependence of state on the Federal government and the rancour of different ethnicities for the number one post. The



strategic gap between the Federal and the states will remain but not significantly. The major interest will shift from securing the presidential position at all cost to regional welfare. As the strategic gap becomes less and less important, main attention will be focused on developmental gap especially in regions neglected under the federal arrangement. The diffusion of power that will evolve among regions will also develop within the constituents' states, bringing them together, fostering regional power that will further weaken the centre (federal) and make it less attractive. This is particularly so given the country's current reality that defies the domination by the three major ethnicities in sharing political power. The country is becoming increasingly multipolar, with each minority tribe seeking to be given equal relevance. For the country to continue to exist as one then, it has to change its character of power consolidation at the centre to co-operation and negotiation among regions, ethnicities and tribes. Soyinka (2020) calls for the dismantling of the crude, militarised centralist contraption that Nigeria is currently and substitute it with 'a more efficient governance system, decentralised, providing broader access to opportunities.' Decentralising federal power is non-negotiable in achieving the shift from *power politics* to *politics of commitment*. The book, then, points to what to avoid, and how to recreate balance based upon the reality of ethnic differences and the dominance of northern leadership.

Second, there is need for a nation builder that will penetrate the whole society – different ethnic groups – and imbue it with a different, common set of norms and values. Achebe insists that Nigeria's principal problem is identifying and putting in place the right leader. Alabi-Isama (2013:58) attributes an estimated two million people who died in the civil war to 'wrong leaders.' He, in fact, sees a major part of the tragedy of the victory of Nigeria after winning the war of unity as the inability 'to put leaders in place who will think about our people, their welfare and their security' (p.569). The problem of leadership has indeed continued to dodge Nigeria's progress and development to the point that Ikokwu (2019:19) quotes Princeton Lyman, a former USA Ambassador to Nigeria, as describing Nigeria as 'becoming a strategic failure to the world and Africa.' Achebe points to Nelson Mandela of South Africa as a selfless and committed leader who Nigerian leaders, African leaders and, indeed, leaders from every part of the world should emulate.

Third, a country built on ethnic foundations and disdain for meritocracy is inherently weak and unstable. To begin with, instead of engaging in massive social engineering, the colonial administration protected the existing social order in all of its variety and complexity. For this reason, the existence of a sense of community is clearly lacking among the different ethnicities. This impinges on

the will to create and sustain a tradition of political unity founded on excellence. Instead Nigeria hides under the dubious principle of federal character to promote incompetence and mediocrity. Achebe reminds that the ‘denial of merit is a form of social injustice that can hurt not only the individuals directly concerned but ultimately the entire society’ (p.78). Further he insists that ‘mediocrity destroys the very fabric of a country as surely as a war – ushering in all sorts of banality, ineptitude, corruption, and debauchery’ (p.236). For him what is called for is to work ‘at developing, nurturing, sustaining, and protecting democracy and democratic institutions’ (p.247). This will, ultimately, usher in a ‘new patriotic consciousness...based on an awareness of the responsibility of leaders to the led – on the sacredness of their anointment to lead – and disseminated by civil society, schools, and intellectuals’ (p.253).

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