



A review of *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* by Chinua Achebe (London: Penguin Book, 2012. 352 pp., ISBN: 978-0143124030) by Samuel Oyewole (Samueloyewole47@yahoo.co.uk), Instructor, Department of Political Science; University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

The Nigerian Civil War remains one of the most important political incidents in the history of the country. The Civil War covers the period of 30 months (1967-1970) of confrontation between the secessionist eastern region, Republic of Biafra and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The significance of this event for Nigerian political development cannot be overemphasised. Forty-four years after the war, its legacies have endured against the stability of the nation. Among the legacies of the Civil War and notable reasons for the book are: 1) despite the policy of reintegration pursued by the post-civil war governments, the Igbos (members of the ethnic group that dominated the

secession) still continued to feel less secure outside their 'state of origin', and most particularly in the northern region; 2) the Igbo people have remained politically marginalised in the national politics; and 3) Biafra and neo-Biafra ideas have continued to serve as popular points of rally and advocacy. The relevance of violent advocacy groups like Movement for Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) is an instance.

Appreciable number of books has appeared on the subject of Nigerian Civil War. Some of the existing accounts have engaged the Civil War broadly, while others focused on aspects of the event, including antecedents of the war, battle experiences, the cost, international dimension, the consequences *et-central*. It is within the context of antecedents of the war and overall cost incurred by the Igbo nation before and during the war that one could find this book worthwhile. The book contribute to knowledge on civil war, ethno-regional politics, insurgency and terrorism, state viability, regime security, leadership crisis, art, education and diplomacy. The book benefited from the reputation of the author in the world of literature, in terms of attention. This account explains the Biafra secessionist struggle within the framework of leadership crisis in Nigeria. This factor is identified to have interplay the phenomenon of ethnicity, democratic reversal and state failure in Nigerian history. The book explains the trend that accounted for the personality clash between General Yakubu Gowon, the military head of state of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and the military governor of the eastern region and the head of (defunct) Biafran state, Lt-Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu. This personality clash plays out well within the framework of ethnic, regional and even religious cleavages. To this understanding, the civil war was identified as ethno-regional struggle within the country, but Ojukwu was successful with propaganda in depicting it as religious war for the Western world.

With the account of massacre that preceded the civil war, the author draws readers' attention to the precedence in patterns of modern terrorism in Nigeria. The book captures the dehumanising crusade against the Igbos outside the eastern region before the war. This is identified as a sufficient, logical and moral reason for men to rebel. Therefore, the moral premises of the secessionist war against the Nigerian federation were acknowledged. Despite this, the author went further to identify efforts made by the Igbos to prevent the rapid deterioration of the situation that caused the civil war. In this way, the commitment of the Igbos to the unity of Nigeria was appraised. However, Biafra project and the support it received from people of eastern region was unavoidable, followed the brake down of those efforts made to save the situation. This support is rational on the ground of personal safety and erosion of national identity.

More than any other things, the book emphasise the cruelty in Nigerian government's war conducts, particularly the policy of economic blockade that accounted for the death of more than a million civilian populations in the region. Nigerian military also advanced and overran the Biafran military and civilian with impunity. Nigeria's human right record in the war include indiscriminate bombing, raping, shooting and bombing of the civilian population, destructions and demolitions, disrespect and disregard for save zones like hospitals and refugee camps, and all sort of acts that corrode the international law and fit to be called genocide. On this ground, doom was widely perceived among the people of Biafra ahead of their failed secession, given the extent that Nigeria has went to prevent their self-determination. This perception is critical to the insurgency that emerged in the region against the Nigerian army, followed the defeat of Biafra.

This account has attracted wide attention, with a shared mix feeling on some themes and the motive of the author. This book has sparked some fundamental public debates in Nigeria. The book has attracted praise and criticism. Some commentators believe in this account as a required re-visitation of history, for a more constructive peace building. In addition to this are some indifferent and suspicious observers of the themes and time of the book. The effects of the book have been debated. To some sect of critical observers, the book is an effort to refresh discord seed in Nigeria, at a time of dire need for national unity against terrorism and subversion. This point was evident with the kind of conflict that ensued between the Yorubas and the Igbos over some themes of the book, particularly the contested role of Chief Awolowo in the Civil War.

Clearly stated as a personal account, however, the objectivity of the book is not out of question. It is apparent that the book was not free from emotional and value laden and moral evaluation. For instance, while the rational for eastern region secession was identified and defended, reasons why Nigerian federation could not avoid presiding on its own disintegration was not appraised. Before the civil war, the book captures how much the Igbo people fear Hausa/Fulani hegemonic ambition in the federation. In contrast, the author wonders why the minority ethnic groups within the Eastern region/Biafra are suspicious of Igbo leadership.

Moreover, while self-determination of the Biafran is appraised against the unity government of Nigeria, the account did little beyond sarcastic feeling of sorry for Mid-Western region that was invaded by Biafran expansionist army. Again, the rationale for rejection of Biafra army as liberator in the Mid-West was less significant in the account. On this ground, the ideas of self-determination and human dignity that the book tries to convene as central points of argument become inconsistent and apparently self-defeating.

Notwithstanding, the book remains an important contribution to knowledge on Nigerian Civil War. The book draws readers' attention to the trends, relevance and legacies of the Nigerian Civil War. Though the book carries a worrisome implication for ethnic consciousness and ethno-political relations in Nigeria, it reflects a glooming experience that must not be allowed to reoccur.