

**FROM CULTURAL NATIONALISM TO A NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CULTURE:  
CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THERE WAS A COUNTRY: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF  
BIAFRA*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In the wake of the nationalist movement, African countries were mainly preoccupied with the project of decolonisation. This involved the politics of resistance against the colonial hegemony and cultural imperialism of metropolitan countries like Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, etc. In the vanguard of this resistance were artists and writers who also enlisted their voices and invested their literary and critical energies in the decolonisation process. A constitutive part of the rhythms of political resistance against the imperial programme was cultural nationalism which witnessed the assertion and affirmation of African cultural traditions, mores and values. Many African writers committed themselves to the anti-colonial rite of writing back from the margins to the imperial centre. Chinua Achebe ranks prominently in this cultural revisionist process. His historical novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* have impressively espoused to this cultural re/validation which privileges African cultural traditions and cosmologies. However, with the intervention of time, there seems to have been a subtle shift of thematic paradigm in Achebe's sensibility from issues negotiating cultural nationalism to those which border broadly on the constitution of a national democratic culture. In his latter literary and critical engagements, strong resonances and the foreground of a democratic imperative to Nigeria's/Africa's cultural experience have become focalised in his fiction. This is obvious in his literary practice in *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and his critical interventions in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, *Hopes and Impediments*, *Home and Exile* and most recently *There was a Country*. My governing argument here is that without necessarily abandoning the legitimate concerns of cultural nationalism, Achebe has increasingly demonstrated his growing acquaintance and intimacy with Nigeria's/Africa's complex political and cultural environment and the inherent contradictions which have perennially occasioned arrested development. As *There was a Country* eloquently bears testimony, Achebe has identified a progressive national democratic culture which functions as a bulwark to strengthen the electoral process, state institutions, human rights and freedoms of persons and popular participation in diverse publics as the path out of the present aridity in which the nation Nigeria (and Africa) has found itself.

## Introduction

Chinua Achebe, Africa's foremost storyteller and one of the world's most successful novelists, is an intriguing study in committed patriotism. In his literary and critical practice for over half a century, Achebe has shown dutiful commitment to his native Nigeria and, indeed, Africa and the Black race. Since he published his maiden novel, *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Achebe who is also known by the epithet of the eagle on the *iroko* has not relinquished this singular dedication to his craft in the service of Nigeria and Africa (Ihekweazu and Azuonye 1; Ezenwa-Ohaeto 280). Therefore, as an accomplished writer with a profound sense of patriotic fervour, Achebe is always involved in the negotiation of Nigeria's postcolonial condition as demanded by the protocols of his vocation. It is this abiding commitment to his nation that drove Achebe to articulate in his literary treatise that the writer must necessarily function as a teacher to his society (Achebe 8). It is to his eternal credit that Achebe has not departed from this pedagogic imperative which should underwrite the artistic endeavour as he has consistently invested his *oeuvre* with timeless didactic currents which speak to and about Nigeria and Africa's distressed condition.

As part of his irrevocable commitment to the national ideal in his aesthetics, Achebe has also acquired a solid reputation for speaking to power in undisguised and powerful cadences. Appropriately, he has been denouncing in unequivocal and unambiguous terms the political shenanigans in postcolonial Nigeria with an entrenched culture of corruption and irresponsible governance. The political dimension of his involvement has clearly indicated that artistic commitment and political engagement are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If anything, they are dialectical as they reinforce and complement each other. Twice in recent history, Achebe has rejected one of the highest national honours in Nigeria, Commander of the Federal Republic, CFR, first by former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2004, and President Goodluck Jonathan in 2011 as a function of his denunciation of the political establishment.

In arriving at this painful decision, Achebe validated this rejectionist strain as a response to the political meddlesomeness of Abuja in the politics of Nigeria. In particular, he pointed to his native Anambra State as an instance during which political brigandage and rascality as well as violent, undemocratic processes were employed by politicians loyal to the state president to cause mayhem, undermine security and threaten a seating governor. In a letter to then President Obasanjo, Achebe stated:

For some time now I have watched events in Nigeria with alarm and dismay. I have watched particularly the chaos in my own state of Anambra where a small clique of renegades, openly boasting its connections in high places, seems determined to turn my homeland into a bankrupt and lawless fiefdom. I am appalled by the brazenness of this clique and the silence, if not connivance, of the Presidency (*African Spotlight* 2011).

He concluded when rejecting the award again that “The reasons for rejecting the offer when it was first made have not been addressed let alone solved. It is inappropriate to offer it again to me. I must therefore regretfully decline the offer again” (*African Spotlight* 1). The Nigerian government has, in a spirited defence, pointed to some of its reforms in the electoral and economic sectors to demonstrate that Nigeria has transited from a fiefdom which Achebe has pointed to as justificatory claim for turning down the award for a second time. However, Achebe’s personal reading of Nigeria’s political and economic physiognomy runs contrary to the official position held by the state. As he has affirmed, “the main problem in contemporary Nigerian society, as well as in many independent African societies, is the lack of restraint in wielding power, added to an unbridled scramble for materialism, which in most cases result in the destruction of democratic principles” (Ojinmah vii).

### ***There was a Country and the Imperative of a National Democratic Culture***

In his latest book, *There was a Country*, Achebe again ploughs the furrowed landscape of Nigeria’s political and social existence with characteristic uncommon courage, fortitude and forthrightness. In this compelling, haunting and masterfully executed autobiographical narrative, Achebe reaches deeply into the inner contours of his native Nigeria’s undulating history and recuperates it with searing and penetrating insights. In this rite of self-telling and re-telling through the instrumentality of the “I” of the beholder, Achebe summons past history and imposes on it the sacred duty and cumbersome burden of answering to the contingencies of present history and the challenges that await the nation in future history. This dialectic between the past, present and future is important to Achebe because his role as “a private, public and prophetic figure who is ordained to bear the burdens of society” is precisely located within this temporal configuration (Tsaaior 84).

As Wole Soyinka succinctly puts it, it is sometimes unavoidable to summon past history to testify in the court of present history. This is because it is only the testimony of the past that can provide the needed verdict which will release the present from the dock of its contradictions and predicaments and so provide an assured future for the benefit of society. For Soyinka and, indeed, for Achebe, history remains a receptacle of the timeless truths which constitute the communal property of “imagined communities” like Nigeria which are “both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1). A creative processing of these truths which are the shared historical experiences of the imagined community can significantly release the latent energies and advance the course of the community’s existence in the present and in the future. Soyinka, therefore, concludes that past history and its (mis)deeds must address the present and account for its needs now and in the future (Nobel Lecture 1986).

Indeed, to Achebe, the future is very critical to the re/mapping of postcolonial Nigeria as an artificial invention of colonial Britain. It is, therefore, incumbent on the writer to tell and re-tell Nigeria’s story and its multiple versions and subversions so that future

progenies can draw productive lessons from it and be adequately equipped for the contingencies or challenges of the future. This, Achebe indicates, is the governing motivation for his narrative account in the book: "It is for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grand-children, that I feel it is important to tell Nigeria's story, Biafra's story, our story, my story" (3). Inevitably, therefore, the personal, autobiographical narrative of the author's life intimately merges with the narrative of Nigeria's nationhood and Biafra's brief attempt at national constitution. It is a collective rendering of narrative accounts: it is Achebe's auto-narrative but it is also the biography of Nigeria and Biafra.

This new book is as much about Nigeria's history as it is about its present and future. It represents Achebe's on-going, never-ending dialogue with his nation. In it he raises salient national questions which have been stubbornly yearning for appropriate answers for some time now. In it he asks perceptive questions, answers some but also questions some of the answers which have been circulating in diverse publics. He also pecks at the putrefying carrion of old arguments thereby inscribing them into the lateral consciousness and discursive agenda of the nation. For instance, since the 1914 amalgamation by the British through colonial fiat, why has Nigeria found it notoriously difficult to evolve a virile, united and prosperous federation where every citizen is free, secure and with a sense of pride and belonging? Indeed, is Nigeria a federation or is it a unitary state? How strong, viable and sustainable is the Nigerian project today? What future does Nigeria hold for its citizens especially those of Igbo extraction? And to put it rather brutally, is Nigeria worth dying for? How and when can Nigeria inspire hope for her citizens and the Black race and win respect for herself in the global community?

The imperative for this Achebean dialogue can be located in the trajectory of events which has dominated and defined Nigeria's national consciousness since political independence on 1 October, 1960, including the brutal civil war of 1967 – 1970. As Achebe insists himself in the introduction to the book:

Most members of my generation, who were born before Nigeria's independence, remember a time when things were very different. Nigeria was once a land of great hope and progress, a nation with immense resources at its disposal – natural resources, yes, but even more so, human resources. But the Biafran war changed the course of Nigeria. In my view, it was a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa (2).

It is clear that Achebe sees in the fratricidal civil war a grave transitory moment from the age of national innocence to a history of running blood and concentrated guilt in which Nigeria became mired and has since remained besmirched. Many will agree with this interpretation of Nigerian history and the routes that have been taken, not taken and mistaken in the process of national fabrication since then. There are also other interpretive networks of Nigeria's history which may contest Achebe's perspective.

Many will disagree with Achebe that the civil conflict is at the centre of this national disjuncture arguing that but for the legendary failure of leadership, the civil debacle could have been a veritable springboard for national efflorescence.

What is, however, important is that in the book, Achebe institutes an inter-textual exchange with his earlier book, *The Trouble with Nigeria* which trouble he blames on the perennial leadership crisis the nation has experienced as a postcolonial state. In a blunt and unequivocal manner, Achebe observes that the problem with Nigeria is squarely that of leadership. His argument pendulates delicately between two extremes. It exists at the interface of a crisis of patriotic and visionary leadership and the deficit in political willingness on the part of the nascent bourgeoisie to arrest the national drift by transcending parochial and primordial sentimentalities following the attainment of independence. This national drift, in Achebe's estimation, became unchecked because the leadership lacked the political acumen and intellectual capacity (or both) critical to national re/formation.

The strength of this book does not inhere so much in the freshness of the ideas pursued and the perspectives articulated by Achebe. On this count, the book is a bit disappointing as its aspirations do not get fully realized. This is because much of the narrative congeals around issues that have circulated and continue to circulate in the popular and official national imagination. For instance, many of the issues the book broaches have been inextricably entangled and implicated in the politics of the nationalist ferment and the resultant political autonomy in 1960 and the surrounding circumstances that culminated in the civil war of 1967 – 1970 and thereafter. All of these issues have dominated – and still structure - public discourse in Nigeria's relentless efforts at national re/invention.

There is also an impressive corpus of oral and written testimonies on this sordid, centrifugal moment of Nigeria's national life which constitute a canon of texts ranging from the historiographical and autobiographical, to the literary, political and the sociological. Alexander Madiebo's *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command*, Adewale Ademoyega's *Why We Struck*, Emeka Ojukwu's *Because I am Involved*, Ben Gbulie's *Nigeria's Five Majors*, Christopher Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Achebe's *Girls at War* and *Beware, Soul Brother*, Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Clark-Bekederemo's *Casualties*, etc.

All of these accounts, in their variegated concerns and divergent perspectives as tributary currents, flow to form a discursive confluence on Nigeria's national question and the contradictions of her nationhood during and after the civil war. However, Achebe's book functions as a fitting memory trough or archive, a veritable reminder that the wounds inflicted by the war might have healed but the cicatrices are still visible and deep and that they may be re-opened if the nation does not avoid the tragic choices of history. Indeed, Achebe perceives a real portent and danger in the manner the nation

continues to conduct its affairs as if there has never been an agonistic and sanguinary past which has continued to haunt present national engineering efforts.

The title of the book is creatively teasing and playfully ambiguous. In this regard, it lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities and receptive cognitions. One obvious layer of meaning is that Achebe is referring to the ephemeral Republic of Biafra which, through a secessionist attempt, fought to invent itself as a new nation. This is apparent from the rider, "A Personal History of Biafra". For nearly three years, Biafra fought Nigeria to realize this elusive ambition at national transplantation. But that gallant rebellion during which millions were decimated now resides in the monuments of history with the surrender of the Biafran forces and the end of the war in January 1970.

The enduring lesson from this tragedy of the snake biting its gorgeous coil mistaking it for an enemy is that Nigeria invoked a social blight and political pestilence on its soul and has never recovered from it ever since. Many, including Achebe, fervently believe that the war irrevocably changed everything for Nigeria. They also believe that the war was clearly avoidable if there was not a deficit in patriotic and selfless leadership. But pristine personal/sectional interests and self-aggrandisement were placed above national concerns. Lesson: arrogant, egocentric and visionless political leadership plunged Nigeria into a needless bloodbath. It is, therefore, clear that through the narrative motions of the book, Achebe mounts a scathing indictment of the political establishment at the time and thereafter particularly those who promoted primordial ethnic and regional sentiments above the interests of the nation.

This interpretive possibility receives consistent validation from the narrative accounts in the book. As Achebe himself argues, Nigeria inspired a lot of optimism and promise at birth and was seen as a country with the manifest destiny to lead the Black race. This expectation was based on her enormous human potentials and natural resources. Its demographic preponderance was particularly seen as an asset which could be deployed for accelerated development. The monumental failure to live up to this expectation squelched the dutiful hopes that were nourished by citizens and friends of Nigeria. Corruption and failed leadership, Achebe unabashedly postulates, has been at the root of the nation's degeneration:

Within six years of this tragic colonial manipulation Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth. Elections were blatantly rigged. The subsequent national census was outrageously stage-managed; judges and magistrates were manipulated by the politicians in power. The politicians themselves were pawns of foreign business interests.

The social malaise in Nigerian society was political corruption. The structure of the country was such that there was an inbuilt power

struggle among the ethnic groups, and of course those who were in power wanted to stay in power. The easiest and simplest way to retain it, even in a limited area, was to appeal to tribal sentiments, so they were egregiously exploited in the 1950s and 1960s (51).

From the foregoing, it is manifest that Nigeria's serpentine, tortuous and torturous journey to nationhood was destined to come to grief and misfortune based essentially on its defective beginning. This started with the satraps of the imperial and colonial enterprise, the British administrators who created regional squabbles, ethnic rivalries, sectional sentiments and political instability long before they retreated to metropolitan London. The nationalists who slipped into the vacated political positions did so with an air of imperial arrogance and cult of personality as veritable heirs to the departing colonialists, not as humane and visionary founding fathers. They proceeded to build on the colonial legacies of divide and rule, ethnicity, regional loyalties, religious bigotry and political intolerance.

An interesting sub-plot in this narrative of a defective foundation for Nigerian nationhood which Achebe identifies is the culture of elections in Nigeria which are mere selections of preferred candidates who are mostly incompetent and lack the requisite credentials to occupy public office and positions of trust and responsibility. It is interesting that this undemocratic culture started with the British colonialists, who in their imperial posturing, constituted themselves as civilising agents and purveyors of a democratic ideal for the colonies. According to Achebe, colonial officials like James Robertson were deeply involved in such manipulations to protect the cause of imperialism:

[...] Sir James Robertson played an important role in overseeing the elections (or lack thereof) at independence, throwing his weight behind Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who had been tapped to become Nigeria's first prime minister.

Later it was discovered that a courageous English junior civil servant named Harold Smith had been selected by no other than Sir James Robertson to oversee the rigging of Nigeria's first election "so that its compliant friends in [Northern Nigeria] would win power, dominate the country, and serve British interests after independence" (50).

The other layer of signification inherent in the book's title gravitates to the hermeneutic imperative of situating Nigeria within the central fabrics of the debate. In other words, Achebe strives for the elasticity of meaning as an event and as an agent in the discursive existence of nationhood. Through this ingenious title, Nigeria, not just Biafra, also acquires a signification. In this regard, Nigeria can fittingly stand as a metaphoric extension for that country that was, a powerful foreground of a nation with an assured destiny and brilliant prospects at the moment of its nativity. What this translates into is

that Nigeria lost her soul during the civil war and what survived the war was a cadaverous entity, an empty shell which masquerades as a nation but is not. In other words, there was once a country called Nigeria but it no longer exists. Better still, Nigeria still exists but not as the country that was envisaged from the beginning. What Nigeria experiences today represent the decrepitude and systemic dysfunction which define failed nation-states. In this perspective, it is legitimate to announce that there was once a country called Nigeria.

One thing is particularly spectacular and instructive about the book. It is that Achebe successfully negotiates a balance between his personal memory archive as an active participant (though not as a combatant) in the proceedings of the Biafra - Nigeria war and the larger archive of national memory. He successfully integrates these two strains in his reminiscences regarding an emergent nationhood whose innocence was brutally mediated and violated by those who should have protected her. But in a telling rite of betrayal the nationalist leaders reneged on this sacred oath having fraudulently sworn to do so. It is this act of national subterfuge by the so-called founding fathers but also successive political mandarins, many of them military despots, which has conducted the nation to the precincts of a yawning precipice.

Achebe's *angst* can, therefore, be understood in the light of an unrelieved, tortured narrative kinesis which simultaneously intrigues and distresses. In a salutary manner, he has executed this textual project with a deep sense of perspicacity despite the long intervention of time. From the nostalgic accounts of his early childhood through his coming of age to the moment of intense nationalism reaching its climax in independence which became gathered in the anti-climactic moment of the civil imbroglio, the stage is set in this bizarre and complex narration of the nation for a disquieting denouement. In this rite of narrating the nation, Achebe achieves a synonymy with Homi Bhabha who perceives nations as "allegories" (Bhabha 1).

What is particularly distressing as Achebe skilfully escorts us into the arteries and labyrinths of Nigeria's chequered historical trajectory is that the nation is a wilful casualty to amnesia. It is infinitely painful that Nigeria seems to have learned nothing from its history and forgotten everything. For instance, corruption in the public frontier which was at the centre of the maiden military putsch of 15 January, 1966 and the civil imbroglio which attended it has been entrenched and institutionalized. Political corruption has particularly become radically redefined as a norm rather than the exception as a culture of election rigging, brigandage, god-fatherism and the cult of personality have been elevated to a national pastime.

### **Narrativising the Self, Narrativising the Nation: Achebe's Example**

In the narrative, it is notoriously difficult to place Achebe. He seems to have reproduced another Achebe. Perhaps this is unknown to the author but the truth is that there exist two Achebes in the book. There is, understandably, a constant contestation or struggle



between the two Achebes. On the one hand is Achebe, the Nigerian patriot who is willing to contribute meaningfully to national development as a dutiful civil servant. On the other hand, there is Achebe, the fierce Biafran nationalist who is driven by an act of national rejection to identify with a new nation like many of his Eastern Igbo compatriots. These two Achebes exist simultaneously in the narrative and compete for space and perspective as they participate in the narrative engagements and discursive skirmishes. And it is difficult to enter an unbiased judgement as to which of the two Achebes articulates a more balanced, compelling and persuasive argument. This crisis of national loyalty and belonging somehow renders Achebe vulnerable and exposes him to attacks by unsparing critics who would want to accuse him of national betrayal.

What, however, emerges from this book is a more informed and crystallized bigger picture of Nigeria as a postcolonial nation-state in a state of perpetual becoming and be/longing. The picture is that Nigeria has never been a nation, is not a nation and may never be a nation. Achebe locates this in the historical particularity of the British artificial invention of the country beginning with the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates under Lord Lugard. The amalgamation was essentially in the imperial interest to further exercise greater hegemony over the occupied territory called Nigeria. But it also yoked together by violence autonomous and heterogeneous peoples/communities who were never consulted or whose consent was never sought. This in itself was consistent with the colonial psychology of imposing on their spheres of influence by fiat any political arrangement that was convenient for metropolitan interests. It happened in India which later became Pakistan and Bangladesh, just like it happened in Africa and other parts of the colonised world.

Achebe also unmasks the myth of the nationalist-politicians who became the eventual founding fathers of Nigeria. It is obvious from the narrative that even though some of these politicians appeared to possess nationalist credentials, they were actually ethnic jingoists, religious bigots and regional apologists who were more interested in their personal ascendancy to power, the primacy of their regions and the imposition of their religious faiths over the overall national interest of Nigeria. An eloquent instance Achebe cites is the stubborn refusal of the premier of the Northern Region, Ahmadu Bello to rename his party, the Northern People's Congress as Nigerian People's Congress to endow it with a more national character and temperament until he was killed in the 1966 coup:

The original idea of one Nigeria was pressed by the leaders and intellectuals from the Eastern Region. With all their shortcomings, they had this idea to build the country as one. The first to object were the Northerners, led by the Sardauna, who were followed closely by the Awolowo clique that had created the Action Group. The Northern People's Congress of the Sardaunians was supposed to be a national party, yet it refused to change its name from Northern to Nigerian

People's Congress, even for the sake of appearances. It refused right up to the end of the civilian regime (51).

Some will view Achebe's position above as essentialist and narcissistic. However, what immediately strikes the perceptive mind here is that politics and party formation processes in the First Republic (and has since then) followed a divisive ethnic, regional and even sectarian trajectory which set the parties and their owners against one another as political enemies in a war of attrition and mutual annihilation. The overriding interest was not the national interest but personal aggrandisement, ethnic hegemony and regional domination. Politics became a veritable tool in the hands of selfish and parochial-minded political demagogues who viewed power essentially as a means to an end: that of domination of the nation and the pursuit of a personal and regional rather than a national agenda. The maiden military putsch which later graduated into the civil war was viewed through the lenses of an Igbo pursuit for political domination over the rest of the country even though it was initially received as a revolutionary attempt at sanitising the cluttered political space during the First Republic.<sup>2</sup>

Achebe's refusal to stand on the shores and merely contemplate the political currents in his country's many political transitions also constitutes another remarkable quality of the book. His active participation in the political process in the Second Republic saw him joining forces with the progressive People's Redemption Party led by the irrepressible Mallam Aminu Kano. Achebe became the vice presidential candidate of the party. This partisan involvement had many implications. It demonstrated Achebe's political persuasions as a man with progressive ideas, populist intentions and sympathies. His open admiration for Aminu Kano, a northern politician as against Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, his kinsman who was in the Nigeria People's Party, is also eloquent testimony to Achebe's convictions. Incidentally, Aminu Kano had also broken faith with the political establishment in the north led by Ahmadu Bello of the NPC when he formed his Northern Elements Peoples Union, NEPU.

On another important score, Achebe's partisan engagement instituted a discursive transaction which created tensions between the artistic enterprise and the artist's commitment to the political process. Should there be any inconsistencies concerning writers and the imperatives of political and artistic commitment? Achebe resolved this question in favour of an overt identification with the alternative of intervening in the political engineering process. This affirmation of the writer as both an artistic and political agent, to him, did not constitute a conflict or contradiction. Rather it necessarily became a complementary and composite initiative aimed at salvaging Nigeria from the stranglehold of the political elite that was selfish, greedy, corrupt, incompetent and visionless.

Many Nigerian artists, including Achebe, Okigbo and Soyinka constituted themselves as public intellectuals who became utterly disillusioned with the Nigerian crisis and became actively involved in the process of halting the precipitous descent into national

anarchy and dystopia. When this could not be avoided, the artists became involved in varying dimensions contingent on their individual temperaments, ideological alignments and ethno-cultural affiliations. As Achebe observes,

We, the intellectuals, were deeply disillusioned by the ineptitude of Nigeria's ruling elite and by what we saw taking place in our young nation. As far as their relationship with the masses was concerned, Nigerian politicians, we felt, had slowly transformed themselves into the personification of Anwu – the wasp – a notorious predator from the insect kingdom...

We were especially disheartened by the disintegration of the state because we were brought up in the belief that we were destined to rule. Our Northern Nigerian brethren had similar sentiments, but those feelings came from a totally different understanding of the world...

This opinion may explain why so many intellectuals played an active role in various capacities during the war years. Some of us evolved into "public intellectuals" through the period of the national crisis leading up to the war and exposed distortions and misrepresentations within the political system. Once the war began, however, many, particularly those of us in Biafra, drew upon the teachings of our ancient traditions (108-109).

In the Biafran case, Achebe particularly implicates Nri philosophy as the guiding principle in the attitudes and responses of the artists/intellectuals to the war. Nri philosophy as he informs, 'implores intellectuals to transform themselves into "warriors of peace" during periods of crisis, with a proclivity for action over rhetoric. Many of our finest writers and thinkers were armed with this ancient wisdom...' (109). The preferment of purposeful action over mere rhetoric and propaganda as dictated by the Igbo Nri philosophical tradition might have informed the choices of some like Okigbo which proved tragic.

By electing to swim in the turbulent political currents, therefore, Achebe chose the alternative which Christopher Okigbo, though in an extreme case, had earlier chosen: that of political commitment to the Biafran nation over the immediate concerns of the artistic enterprise. Earlier, Achebe too had served the fledgling Biafran nation as a cultural ambassador, travelling to various parts of Africa, Europe and the Americas to present the Biafran case before the world and solicit support for the struggling nation and for humanitarian assistance. Achebe's attention to Okigbo and his tragic end at the beginning of the war is severely abbreviated probably because of the devastating impact of his demise on his psychology as an intimate friend. We do have intimations in Achebe's reminiscences about Okigbo in the book, though. (Achebe heard about his death through electronic means: the radio). This is especially when his young son

innocently pleads with Achebe not to let Okigbo die when he announces the latter's fatal death in action.

It is in Obi Nwakanma's biographical account entitled, *Christopher Okigbo: Thirsting for Sunlight* that a full-fledged artistic sketching of Okigbo's life has been executed. In this book, Okigbo's complex personality as a restless poet who was passionately involved in the evolving social and political history of Nigeria and etched much of it in his poetry is highlighted. As Nwakanma volunteers, "From Okigbo's poetry, we in fact, glimpse his anguish reconciled to the complex of events, from the disruptions suffered out of colonialism to the elation of freedom associated with political independence, from the deep private scars of failed love to the anomie of postcolonial society" (xii). As he further observes, "Okigbo lived with dramatic intensity and enchantment... He lived greedily, pursuing the sensuous life with the gusto of the prodigal: he had a mind that was explosive, so in the need of experience and so very passionate" (xiii).

There is a huge debate on the sacredness of art and the relationship the artist should have with his vocation. Because of this sacredness, many believe that art is a rarefied calling which imposes on the artist the protocols of superintending over society as the custodian of morality, values and mores. This school argues that the artist must live within society but must also be above society so that he can have an objective and corrective vision of society so as to censure it when necessary. In this regard, the artist must be scrupulous and unflinching in this sacred duty by staying above politics and ensure strict fidelity to his artistic calling. On the other hand, others argue that art must have a functional value and utilitarian significance. As such, the artist must be committed in a political and ideological sense since art is not for art's sake but for the everyday needs of society.

Achebe finds in his friend, Okigbo an exemplum of the latter. Okigbo renounced the office of the poet-artist and enlisted to participate as an army major and combatant in the political turbulence of the Biafra-Nigeria war, evincing a wilful commitment to the political situation in which the nation was enmeshed at the time. He has never been spared by the artistic Sanhedrin. Indeed, in *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, Ali Mazrui has summoned him to the court of history and art for trial for abdicating his office as a poet for that of a combatant soldier thereby tragically ending his life and robbing the artistic commonwealth of his valuable services. As the novel declares: "He is to be charged with the offence of putting society before art in his scale of values. (...) No great artist has a right to carry patriotism to the extent of destroying his creative potential" (13).

In Achebe's case, his encounter with poet-politician, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal is interesting in many respects. Despite the agonising wait due to security concerns, Achebe's eventual meeting with Senghor convinced him further of the important and decisive role required of the writer/artist in the making of the new nations of Africa. Senghor was himself a celebrated poet like Achebe and Okigbo but his political

involvement did not diminish his towering literary stature as he enthusiastically discussed artistic matters with his guest. The poet-president of Senegal espoused the philosophy of Negritude as an Afrocentric attitude which the Black personality should adopt as an identity marker and cultural self-referentiality in relation to himself and the world.

Achebe's book has been very controversial in some respects. This is not altogether unexpected and difficult to understand. Achebe is a cosmopolitan citizen of the republic of letters who is courageous about his convictions. He is also a patriotic Nigerian too and negotiating the Nigerian condition can sometimes be heart-bleeding and soul-rending. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the book has been generated by a statement credited to Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba politician who was the war-time finance minister and a prominent member of the military government of General Yakubu Gowon, who was the Head of State during the war. Awolowo is credited to have said thus: "All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder". The statement is a direct consequence of the prolonged blockade on secessionist Biafra during which relief aid was prevented from reaching the beleaguered territory. This caused mass starvation of civilians especially children, women and the elderly who were not combatants but mere casualties caught in a war zone.

Again, as everything else, the discursive skirmishes on this issue have gravitated to ethnocentric and political capillaries, divesting critical energies from the real issue to pedestrian concerns. Achebe is himself guilty in this regard as he drew the first blood when he observes of Awolowo in relation to the famous pronouncement:

It is my impression that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was driven by an overriding ambition for power, for himself in particular and for the advancement of his Yoruba people in general. And let it be said that there is, on the surface, at least, nothing wrong with those aspirations. However, Awolowo saw the dominant Igbos at the time as the obstacles to that goal, and when the opportunity arose – the Nigeria-Biafra War – his ambition drove him into a frenzy to go to every length to achieve his dreams. In the Biafran case it meant hatching up a diabolical policy to reduce the numbers of his enemies significantly through starvation – eliminating over two million people, mainly members of future generations (233).

What is at stake here is the politics of individuated and national memory and its interface with the morphology of remembrance. Achebe has chosen to mobilise his personal memory and to mediate it through a tortured and agonised process of remembrance which yearns for therapeutic healing from the historical injustice of the war through the blockade. In other words, he has chosen to remember differently from the way apologists of Awolowo and those who sympathised with, and fought on the

side of, the federal government would remember. Just to remember is one thing; to choose to remember in a certain, personalised way is another. The former is not so ideologically positioned as such. The latter accomplishes a political programme which is intended to privilege the self and the group the subject is speaking on behalf. This is what Achebe executes in this politics of selective memory and remembrance. And no one can begrudge or deny him this politics.

The controversial element in Achebe's position is that it succeeds in stoking the embers of ethnocentrism even though his argument is compelling, persuasive and may even be true. Through it, old, festering wounds which have refused to completely heal have again been rankled. To be sure, in a war situation, military strategists argue that every weapon, including starvation, is legitimate. So Awolowo might have justified his position in this direction even though this unfortunately culminated in the decimation of a chunk of the Biafran population, mainly helpless children. He might have done this for personal and ethnocentric reasons but he was not the only person making the war decisions. It is likely that any other person could have said the same thing. The lesson here is that war, like a bloody revolution, consumes all, including its very children.

Considering the fact that the book has reopened the wounds which have denied the balm of history, it is sufficient to state that Nigeria's efforts at national healing, reconciliation and re-invention are still largely inconclusive. This is obvious in the divisiveness of the discourse the book has re/kindled and the ethnic trajectories it has followed, in many instances, clearly avoiding the salient national issues which should command attention. While many Yoruba are vociferous in calling for Achebe's head in what looks like a millennial ethnic manhunt, Achebe's kinsmen have not stopped at nothing in deifying him for his courage and forthrightness. Northern apologists have also denounced what they term Achebe's ethno-cultural politics. Some have, however, chosen to negotiate the issues embedded in the debate through dispassionate and objective perspectives by identifying the strengths and limitations of the arguments.

One strategy of purging individual and national memory is to remember past history, in this situation, the Nigerian civil war in a manner that will encourage national healing rather than reawaken the embers that have been smouldering under the cinders. To abandon the past to itself, to its fate may not be a comfortable and productive way to address the contingencies of the present. However, to remember the past for the singular purpose of re-enacting its drama of violence and injustice without the strategic intent to tame the demons of present and future history can be uncharitable and detrimental to national engineering and its corporate essence. In a social, political and cultural environment like Nigeria where a culture of robust debate on issues of national consequence has been nurtured and entrenched only by default, Achebe's new book comes as a metaphor for an oasis in a vast desert. But the debate must be guided in directions that can be meaningfully engaging and nationally salvific.

Achebe has suggested that Nigeria and Africa should look next door at the historical experience of South Africa and its legendary struggle against apartheid, a history steeped in blood, oppression and repression. As he observes, selfless, progressive and visionary leadership through Nelson Mandela, the consistent symbol of that struggle, has accomplished the historic project of national reconciliation in the former apartheid enclave. Leadership is again inescapably implicated in the African contradiction and predicament. Ruminating on Africa's ruinous and pestilential leadership condition, Achebe points to political disasters like Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo who, after running his country aground, was succeeded by his first son in a classic case of modern primogeniture and dynastic politics. The crisis of leadership is present in many African countries. Achebe rhetorically observes with characteristic disappointment in what he calls "Africa's leadership charade":

What do African leaders envision for their countries and their people? I wondered yet again. Have they not heard that where there is no vision the people perish? Does the judgement of history on their rule mean anything to them? Do they remember how a man called Mandela, who spent twenty-seven years in prison for South Africa, gave up the presidency of that country – a position that he so richly deserved – after only four years and made way for another younger and younger patriot? Why do African leaders choose bad models...? (258)

## Conclusion

Achebe has departed significantly from the grid of issues which structured the thematic preoccupation of his early literary and critical practice, namely cultural nationalism in the face of western colonial arrogance. This is the issue that he grappled with in the historical novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The transition registers itself in a thoughtful shift to the difficult but necessary process of a viable and sustainable national democratic culture. Here, *A Man of the People*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Anthills of the Savannah* find their thematic stridency and validation. The battles of the past are still important to frontally engage in but only in ways that can privilege the challenges of post/modernity. So while Africa's cultural and social history yields post/modernity a distinct subjectivity and confers on African peoples the requisite agency and assured place in the world, culture itself is never invariant, static or frozen. Rather, it is in a perpetual state of flux or transition. What is significant about history is the human capacity to harness it for the pressing needs of the present and the uncertainties of the future.

This is the abiding thematic concern of *There was a Country*. Through the book, Achebe opens a dark, jeremiad chapter in Nigeria's chequered history, the civil war in particular, to enable his readers to contemplate its presences, absences, gaps, injustices, violence, treacheries, disasters, failures, fears and the huge expectations of the moment and those that inhere in the future. What Achebe has tried to achieve is to

psychoanalyse Nigeria's naked soul and the brutal wounds that have been inflicted on the national psyche with a view to ad/dressing them, perhaps, for a lasting cure of its pathological condition. To Achebe, the efficacious therapy to the pathology of the Nigerian condition (but also African condition), rests in visionary leadership, good governance, strong democratic institutions, the enforcement of fundamental human rights and freedoms, justice, equity, the rule of law, an entrenched culture of debate and an enlightened citizenship through sound civic education. In all these, Achebe, in his new book, persuades us to accept that a national democratic culture with a strong but humane leadership represents the alternative for Nigeria's and Africa's renaissance.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe died on 21 March, 2013 in the United States of America at the point this review essay was completed. He was 83 years.

<sup>2</sup> There has been a running debate in Nigeria about the ethnic configuration of the leaders of 15 January, 1966 coup plot. They are commonly referred to as the "Five Majors". Discourses of an ethnocentric kind refer to the coup as an "Igbo" coup even though not all the five principal participants were of Igbo ethnicity.

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