

REVIEW OF BOOKS

There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra. By CHINUA ACHEBE. New York: Penguin Press, 2012. Pp. 333. \$27.95.

Chinua Achebe's *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* adds to a growing list of books written on the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). This long awaited memoir weaves Achebe's biography, with his perceptions of and experiences in colonial, post-colonial and post-civil war Nigeria. This personal recollection adds to a few other accounts on the non-combat dimensions of the war. As unarguably Nigeria's most accomplished academic, intellectual and novelist, Achebe brings to light deep reflections on the causes, course and effects of the war.

Achebe is personally driven and motivated to tell his story. This drive is clearly stated early in the book: "It is for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grandchildren, that I feel it is important to tell Nigeria's story, Biafra's story, our story, my story." He thus clearly affirms this to be a personal reflection. This is valuable considering the divided opinions and contestations on issues pertaining to Nigeria, which has borne out since the book hit the stands.

The book is divided into four parts thematic rather than chronological parts. This affords the reader to follow back and forth the workings of Achebe's mind on the main themes. The first part of the book explores Achebe's upbringing in colonial Nigeria and experiences in an independent Nigeria until Biafra's secession on May 30, 1967. Achebe emphasizes how his father's missionary activities and love for education shaped his life experiences and literary skills. The author sets his upbringing and youth in the midst of several changing events in Nigeria such as the nationalist and anti-colonial campaigns, and the crises of the First Republic. He particularly notes the bloody massacres of the Igbos in northern Nigeria, and shortly afterwards, Biafra's declaration of independence, as two defining factors which have almost irrevocably shaped Nigerian state and society. In the following two parts, Achebe concentrates on the Nigerian Civil War, illuminating how Biafra's motivation and mobilization for the war including innovation in military weaponry. Not only do these show the capacity of the Igbo, but also the loss of that innovative capacity to Nigeria and Africa. Achebe accounts for the fall of the Biafran secession as resulting from the duplicity of International organizations and individuals, strategic blunders in Biafra, and Nigeria's policy of genocide.

Achebe was deeply involved with Biafra. Alongside other others like the renowned poet, Christopher Okigbo, Achebe saw his role and contribution as providing the necessary "intellectual foundation" for the sustainment of Biafra, and pushing an international understanding of the rationales for going to war, and knowledge of Biafran war experience.

Expectedly, Achebe is been variously criticized for this book. His critics have ranged from the valuable to the absurd, including many who may not have read the book. Achebe is especially accused of being an Igbo chauvinist because of his depiction of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Nigeria's finance minister during the war, and acclaimed leader of the Yoruba, as the architect of genocide against the Igbo people. Others highlight the author's weak exploration of the processes that culminated in the starvation of Igbos during the war. Yet others suggest that Achebe should be fostering peace and national reconciliation rather than digging up past hurts.

It appears obvious that the public reactions to the book fail to grasp the purpose Achebe set out for himself. He has always been unwavering in his views on Nigeria, including by refusing a national award when it was bestowed on him by the government. Achebe insists that it

is reckless not to recount the past, especially because the injustices which led to the war have not changed by remain the defining character of Nigeria. These injustices continue to breed sectarian and subnational passions.

From a scholarly point a view, *There Was A Country* adds to the growing volume of studies on the Nigerian Civil War and Nigeria's history. It draws the reader to recognize the connections between colonialism, state formation and the crises of the post-colonial state in Africa. For being a personal narration, it invited more historical examination of many contentious issues in Nigeria's history. It is a very valuable book for scholars and students of African and Nigerian history, colonial and the post-colonial state in Africa.

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Editor's Note:

Chinua Achebe passed away while this article was being reviewed.

Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Text. By Teresa Washington, Indiana University Press, 2005, Pp. 332.

The principal objective of this book is the recovery of the African "text" from detraction and dent by the intrusion of Western culture and imperialism. Many authors have read African orality in their "original" forms in a bid to discover contextual meanings that has not been dichotomized by the wave of modern epistemology. In *Our Mothers, Our Powers, our Text*, Teresa Washington explores the Yoruba concept of *Aje* in its multiple literary, linguistics, social and political meanings.

For Washington, *Aje* goes beyond its everyday usage and literary meaning to summarize the total inner and manifest being of womanhood in Africa. *Aje* connotes spiritual power of extensive ability. While men may possess such abilities, women are the controllers by being the *Iyami* (my mother, my lord, my source). The women who possess *Aje* are literal and cosmic mothers and they are revered as gods of society.

Washington's study connects the Yoruba conception of womanhood to debates in gender and feminisms. With her reference to *Aje* as an original form of the role and place of women in the society, she lends her voice to the abundance or shortage of pre-colonial gender discourses. This no doubt is beyond the absolute 'traditional' African, its creativity connotes that globally the domination of women is modernistic. The author in doing this used the experiences of black women in the Americas diaspora. The author agrees with Oyewunmi Ibironke's school of thought that Western intrusions undermined the place of women in Africa; and with other colonial constructivist theories like that of Mundimbe. The book is valuable as it reinterprets what has been discoloured and labelled as 'witchcraft', it highlights on local narratives of gender creating the space for further historical research into local discourses. The book gives an account of an on-going discourse on women with its use of old narratives of 'Aje' with modern literature and a reflection on the zeal attached to the conception of female identity and the roles of women.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part lays the appropriate conceptualizations of Aje in Africana Orature as historical reality and in contemporary literature. Aje's powers to create and re-create is equated to women's reproductive and productive powers which are socially sanctioned and widely respected. These powers and their usages manifest in many aspects of African culture and conceptions of identity. Such consciousness of the value and role of women is reproduced knowingly and unwittingly in contemporary African literature including those of Wole Soyinka, Zora Neale, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, and Ntozake Shange.

The ways these authors engage the many forms of Aje's social and cultural relationships is the subject of the second part of the book. Many authors recover the dynamism and vibrancy of African women from the imperialist ideology which has labelled African women as inferior or that they became visible only after colonialism facilitated their exposure. The recurring theme of this book is that "Aje" is well and alive, in the fullness of its meanings and power; and it has always been, in spite of Western and comprador local denigrations.

Despite its value, *Our Mothers* invites controversy over its basic assumptions and premises. In pushing the case for a uniform and holistic conception of womanhood, it fails to capture the diversity of the Yoruba experience. From a historical point of view, the book assumes rather than explains the process by which Aje became a cultural axiom. It silences the contending narratives and discourses upon which Aje became dominant. Recent studies in Yoruba history, such as J.D.Y Peel question the idea of singularity of the Yoruba experience, including challenging whether there were "Yoruba women" during the 19th century, or if these women conceived themselves to be of this identity.

In addition, the author argues that there has always been a harmonious gender dualism—an association accepted by both sexes which resulted in empires founded and ruled by women. Circumstances gave birth to 'Aje' which was silent in the pre-colonial and became active when the harmonious gender dualism was disrupted by the influx of aliens between the 1600s and the 1900s. The outcome of cultural intrusion infected the male psyche and led to the "male: good, female: evil" dichotomy which also led to the conclusion that outspoken and vibrant women, were 'Aje' (witches). Furthermore, the author's use of Aje to classify mother-daughter relationship (reference page) appears awkward where the concept is described as a spiritual force inherent in all African women. The case that the mother exhibits the 'Aje' traits does not directly mean the daughter too will. While there is a hint of intra-gender contestation, the book does not explore the subject.

In all, the book makes a profound case for the appreciation of the historical roles of African women. Where they had been written out of history for being "Aje," a reinterpretation shows that vibrant women exercised their natural and socially constructed capacities to define not only themselves but their social spaces. Women have always been very powerful not by virtue of being 'Aje' (witch) but by being "Aje" (woman, source) with special and peculiar abilities. For these, I strongly recommend this book for students of African history and Yoruba culture, and for scholars engaged in defining the place of women in history and society.

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