

Chinua Achebe, *There Was A Country*, (New York: The Penguin Press), 2012. pp. 333.

By Emily Milstein

Chinua Achebe is undoubtedly one of Nigeria's, and Africa's, best known and most celebrated authors. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and arguably one of the continent's most diverse, has had a bumpy, conflict-ridden road since the nation gained its independence from Great Britain in 1960. The secession of Biafra in 1967 and the subsequent civil war that exploded in Nigeria are emblematic of the country's struggle to grapple with the question of what it means to be Nigerian. Achebe's *There Was A Country* deals with this question, speaking on behalf of all Igbos and asserting their place as Nigerians as well as their right to act in a way that will ensure their well being. Part memoir, part historical narrative, and part collection of poems, Achebe's book seamlessly bridges the gap between these different genres to produce a work of literature that provides readers with a nuanced understanding of complex historical event.

Beginning with a bit of personal background, Achebe tells the story of Biafra and of the Igbos' struggle against persecution and violence at the hands of their fellow, non-Igbo, Nigerians. Well-educated and economically successful, the Igbo contributed significantly to Nigeria's economic and political development in the mid-20th century. Jealousy on the part of non-Igbo Nigerians however built up anti-Igbo resentment that exploded violently in the period after Nigeria's 1966 coup. Igbo and Nigerian bloodshed continued into the Biafran war, mounting a huge psychological and physical toll on Nigeria's Igbos, to which Achebe devotes much of his book.

Achebe speaks about the immense sense of optimism and hope that Biafrans felt after secession and through the start of the war. For Igbos in particular, the Biafran state represented Igbos' right to detach themselves from a Nigeria that they felt had abandoned them and stood by as their people were massacred by non-Igbos. Achebe shows how Biafra's sense of confidence diminished over the course of the war, as Nigeria used brutal tactics against Biafran civilians and as the international community largely failed to recognize or support Biafra.

The book's strength lies in Achebe's ability to make an emotional appeal to readers. Achebe's straightforward yet elegant prose poignantly conveys the heartbreak Nigerian Igbos experienced before, during, and after the war, as they watched their lives collapse around them and as Igbos became victims of unthinkable violence and hardship. Achebe's inclusion of poetry, coupled with his immense capacity to tell stories, goes a long way in helping readers comprehend the anguish, confusion, and sense of betrayal that Igbos felt during the pre-secession violence that swept through Nigeria in 1966. That sense of betrayal also extended into the war period, as Biafra and its tragedy failed to garner significant attention from the international community.

The book does provide a bit of an Igbo-centric view of the Nigerian civil war and the secession of Biafra, however, such a tilt is to be expected and in no way detracts from the book's overall power. Achebe also seems to take for granted the fact that Biafra's non-Igbo inhabitants supported the Igbos' and Biafra's joint cause, which may or may not have been the case.

Achebe ends with a lament for the state of affairs in present day Nigeria, for what he perceives to be Nigeria's rampant corruption, poor governance, and ultimate descent into state failure. Ending the book on this note is important because it also allows Achebe to provide his own prescription for Nigeria's ills and ends the book on a note of hope that Nigeria can overcome its difficulties in the future.