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A rehabilitation of history*

(A review of **Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War**)

(August 1998)

The publishers of the book, **Perspectives on the Nigerian civil war**, describe it as "the most comprehensive text on the Nigerian Civil War to appear in the last twenty years". To the best of my knowledge this is correct.

When **Nzeogwu**, written by General Olusegun Obsanjo, appeared seven years ago, in 1987, several influential Nigerians denounced it not because it is not an objective account of that young army major's life and career but because it was written at all. The first crime of the writer, according to these critics, was that he wrote the book, the second was that he did not portray Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu as a devil. A similar reaction from the same set of critics attended the publication, some years later, of the history of the Nigerian Army written by the army itself.

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These critics want the history of the Nigerian Civil War to be written in line with the positions and opinions of the victors who also happen to be the core of Nigeria's ruling bloc today. No. The history of a Civil War is not a chronicle of the positions and opinions of victors. The history of any conflict is the account of the origins, trajectory and resolution of the conflict, a reconstruction of events in the order in which they occurred. Cause and effect may be dialectical, but historians are not permitted to reverse them. History is not a political tract; it is not a manifesto; it is not a statement in self-justification or self-defence. History is not written in the service of a power-bloc or to seek admission into a power-bloc. Several accounts of the Nigerian Civil War written before now are in this category of pseudo-history.

When a historical account is rendered by academics and intellectuals its objectivity should be limited only by the facts available to them and their analytical power, not by their subjective inclinations or the fear of possible consequences of the facts presented and the conclusions reached therefrom. Sources of definitive statements should be provided in such a way that they can be checked. And if such statements are personal recollections, they should be so classified. The eleven young men who wrote the book, **Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War**, have tried to uphold these principles. And this is one of the strongest attributes of their work.

Avoiding known subjective pitfalls the writers correctly refused to put Biafra in inverted commas as several pseudo-historians of the Civil War have done. These academics deserve commendation even for this. But for reasons best known to them, or the editors, or the publishers, Biafran military officers were not given their correct ranks. If Biafra was real, as virtually all the contributors to the book maintain, if the Civil War was real and not an idea in one's head, then the Head of State of Biafra was General Odumegwu Ojukwu, his Chief of Defence Staff was **Major-General** Phillip Effiong and the leader of the Liberation Army in the Mid-West in August 1967 was **Brigadier** Victor Banjo.

Biafra was not the first state in history to disappear and historians will not be fair to themselves, their readers and their account if they remove titles and ranks that truthfully describe the situation that existed as an objective reality. The authors of the book should, in the next edition, remove the contradiction between the recognition of

the reality of the state of Biafra and their implied rejection of the titles conferred by this state. This they can do by restoring the ranks of Biafran military officers mentioned in the book.

The Nigerian Civil War is usually taken to have started on July 6, 1967 and to have ended 30 months later, on January 12 1970. The writers of this anthology adopt this view. But realising that a serious and useful account of the war cannot be given without some information on its antecedents and aftermath, the writers have also given us an account of the origins of the Civil War. Indeed most of the unanswered questions on that War are in the sphere of its origins. The bold attempt made in the book to answer the unanswered questions in this sphere is another of its attributes.

Another preliminary point. A sustained armed struggle waged by internal social forces to seize control of a state is called a Civil War. When an internal armed struggle is waged to create a new state out of an existing state it is also called a Civil War. Although each can transform into the other - as the July 1966 coup showed -the two are different politically and militarily. The Nigerian Civil War belongs to the latter category. Perhaps the title of the book would have been the **Nigeria-Biafra War**.

The book covers 350 pages. There are 17 chapters, divided into four, sections: Section One, which takes up Chapters 1 to 4, deals with the **Background to the Civil War**; Section Two, **The War Process**, takes up Chapters 5 to 9; Section Three, **The War Aftermath** takes up Chapters 10 to 13, and Section Four, running from Chapter 14 to Chapter 17, is a set of critical reviews of several creative works on the civil War. We may now go to some details.

Chapter 1, **The Historical Roots of the Nigerian Civil War**, contributed by Kunle Amuwo, is a resume of Nigerian history from the last phase of colonial rule to the eve of the Civil War. Taken in isolation, it offers nothing new, but read in conjunction with Chapter 5, **The Political Economy of the Nigerian Civil War**, also written by Amuwo, we see an attempt to apply the well-known political - economy method, or materialist method, to the study of the Nigerian crisis. The main proposition of this method is that political struggles, ethnic conflicts, coups d'etat, and wars cannot be explained solely by the terms and slogans thrown up in those struggles, for most of

these terms and slogans are either ideological, idealistic or illusory. An examination of the ways in which a given society reproduces its material life is an imperative, if we want to understand any conflict within it. Applying this method Amuwo came to the conclusion that the Nigerian Crisis in general and the Civil War in particular were not simply ethnic, or the product of the personal ambition of a leader, namely, that of General Ojukwu, and that behind each ethnic slogan or individual posturing is the struggle for primitive accumulation in a post-colonial society.

Chapters 2 to 4 can be described as the core of the book. Here the prelude to the January 15 1966 coup is described. The main characters in that coup, the counter-coup of July 1966, the crisis that followed, and the Civil War are named and their biographical sketches and roles provided. This is a bold departure from the pseudo-history of official chroniclers who name the real and imagined leaders of the 1966 coup but gloss over the identities and roles of the leaders of the July 1996 coup.

Chapter Two, **Kaduna Nzeogwu, the Coup and prelude to the Civil War**, contributed by Siyan Oyeweso, the editor of the anthology, provides a full list of officers who planned and led the January 15, 1966 attempted coup d'etat and provides their biographical sketches. It also provides the full list of political and military leaders who were killed as well as their killers. Oyeweso assembles evidence to show that the attempted coup was neither an Igbo plot nor an attempt by the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) to use the Armed Forces to come to power - as have been alleged in several books so far written on the War. But he admits that the list of the coup planners and that of the victims, taken together, give both impressions. His conclusion: "In 1966 Nzeogwu emerged to play the hero and to fulfill the aspirations of the generality of the Nigerian peoples, but that noble objective was aborted" (p53). I agree completely

The main question in Chapter Three, **Aguiyi-Ironsi and the Nigerian History: A Re-Interpretation**, is whether General Ironsi's assumption of power was the conclusion of the majors' coup; in other words, whether Ironsi was part of the majors' conspiracy. The answer given by Oyeweso is that "Ironsi was not part of Nzeogwu's coup" (p.68) and that what brought Ironsi to power was not the majors' coup, but a counter-coup. The chapter gives an account of Ironsi's tenure as Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, his errors, his naivety, his

prevarications, and how he and Lt-Col Fajuyi were killed in the coup of July 29, 1966. Their killers are named, just like the killers of January 1966.

Ojukwu is the subject of Chapter four, **The Ojukwu Factor in the Outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War**. The chapter, also written by Oyeweso, starts with a provocative quotation from Prof. E. A. Ayandele's **The Educated elite in the Nigerian Society**: "If an individual ever decided the courses of events in any country, Odumegwu Ojukwu did - by pushing Nigeria inexorably in the direction of war" (p.95). But through an examination of the available facts and events, the author comes to a less metaphysical conclusion, namely, that "Ojukwu's responsibility is that he merely captured and articulated the Igbo mood (especially, that of the ruling class), a mood not determined by him but by the contradictions of the larger Nigerian society and life history" (P. 110)

Chapter 6, by Segun Johnson, is a study and critique of the French role in the Nigerian Civil War. His conclusion is that "Franco-Nigeria's relations between 1964 and 1970 fluctuated from one of hostility, mutual suspicion to a grudging recognition of each others' national interests" (p. 145),

The class character of the Civil War, an important political question, was discussed principally in chapters 5 and 8 by Kunle Amuwo and Abubakar Momo respectively. Both writers agree that the crisis and the war to which it led were fundamentally or essentially an intra-class (or intra-elite) struggle, but Amuwo warns that it was not entirely so. Momoh says that Biafra as a state was real, but that the cause it pursued was a myth in the sense, for example, that "what to do for the Biafran people (masses) was not addressed as a project" (p. 164) and that the minorities in the new state suffered worse deprivations and oppression than they suffered in Nigeria. These two factors contributed critically to defeat. This is also the view of Ayo Omotayo, the author of Chapter 7, **Environmental factors in the prosecution of the Nigerian Civil War**. To Omotayo, the most critical environmental problem was that the Igbo regarded the war as their own, thus alienating the other groups (p. 157).

Momoh dismisses the Ahiara Declaration of June 1969 as a piece of propaganda "which was initiated not with the genuine and honest appreciation of the interest and

sufferings of the toiling people of Biafra, but with the hope of consolidating the interest and hegemony of the ruling class in Biafra" (p. 176) The active role played by leftists in drafting the document which he leads evidence to show, does not shift Momoh from this position. Thus Momoh does not think that the Biafran left constituted a third option or that the Banjo-Ifeajuna project, supported by Wole Soyinka, constituted such an option.

Momoh, a valued Marxist scholar, is perhaps too severe in his judgement. He is not convinced that the radical intervention which he acknowledges was capable of quantitative growth, let alone qualitative transformation. I think there were genuine radical attempts to develop a **third force** both in Nigeria and in Biafra. These attempts may not pass the test of proletarian consciousness, but they deserve recognition and study.

There are two main questions in Chapter 9. **Some considerations on Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Victor Banjo and others in the Nigerian Civil War.** The first is whether Ifeajuna, Banjo and Alale planned to develop a third option, a radical resolution of the Nigeria-Biafra divide, through a return to the agenda of the young majors. The second question is whether a coup d'etat against Ojukwu was planned by these men and others in September 1967. Oyeweso's answer to the first question is "yes" and his answer to the second question is "No" (page 207). These are major questions in that conflict and Oyeweso's study is also a major contribution to the answers.

Chapter 10, **The impact of the Civil War on the Nigerian State**, by Said Adejumobi, is a study of the consequence on the Nigerian federation of what the author describes as "the greatest crisis of nationhood that has ever confronted the Nigerian state since its creation in 1914". (p. 222). His conclusion is that the economic and political distortions created during the Civil War and justified by that war have not been corrected. Rather, they have become worse.

Chapters 11 to 13 examine the twin-question of **Abandoned Property and Igbo Re-integration into the nation.** Here the authors, Abolade Adeniji and Siyan Oyeweso, present facts and data which they argue show that the claim of continuing

alienation or marginalisation is not valid. Readers have to examine the data and read the analyses to see how valid the conclusion is. All that can be said here is that a distinction ought to be made between the re-constitution of the Igbo elites into a power-bloc and their re-integration into inter-power-bloc competition on the one hand, and the re-assimilation of the Igbo masses into the mainstream of the Nigerian nation on the other.

Chapters 14 to 17 are works of literary criticism, criticism of a selection of creative writings on the Nigerian Civil War. Chapter 14, **Bali and Vatsa: Soldiers, War and Poetry**, by Rotimi Johnson, is a review of the war poems of Generals Mamman Vatsa and Domkat Bali. Chapter 15, **Nigerian Civil War and Creative 'Strategies**, by Steve Ogunpitan, takes up a wide range of literary artists, including Soyinka, Achebe, J. P. Clarke, Wonodi, Jemie, Vatsa, Gabriel Okara, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Elechi Amadi, Kalu Uka, Flora Nwapa, Cyprian Ekwessi, Eddie Iroh, Isidore Okpewho. Chapter 16, by Rotimi Johnson, is a review of the works of Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa, The last chapter of the book, Chapter 17, **The War and the Word**, by Adeleke Fakoya, is a study of Isidore Okpewho's **The Last Duty**, not as fictionalised history, but as a work of art.

Conclusion:

Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War is a good book, a product of painstaking research. Its distinctive contribution to knowledge issues from the questions it asks and the boldness with which it attempts to answer them. The intellectual and academic status is clearly high. But this is not simply because of the wide range of references and explanatory notes used in support of conclusions, but the way facts are put together to reach such conclusions. The propositions are bold, but not irresponsible or reckless.

Most of the omissions and errors in the book - and there are only a few of them - could have been removed by more thorough editorial work. The sections ought to have been demarcated and each one introduced. The type faces towards the end of the book are uneven. There are minor errors of dates and titles (for example on pages 105 and 124).

One would have loved to see a chapter of the book devoted to the military campaign itself. Although some of the chief participants in the war have refused to write on the campaign, enough material is now available to re-construct the campaign for the benefit of students of military history. The National Question in Biafra also deserves a separate chapter to complement the Chapter on the class struggle in Biafra. Several contributions, in particular those by Momoh, Oyeweso and Amuwo clearly suggest that a separate chapter on the role of the left both in Nigeria and in Biafra ought to have been included. Leftists did a lot on both sides, but they were rewarded with detention.

These criticisms notwithstanding, **Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War** is a book which every literate Nigerian ought to read and, if possible, possess.

In the fullness of time, a **People's Commission** will have to be set up in Nigeria, to examine the events of (1966-1970) and provide answers to the remaining unanswered questions of that conflict. When such a commission comes, this book will serve it as a valuable material.