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Obasanjo's settlement with history

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When, on May 29, 2000, President Olusegun Obasanjo announced the conversion of the dismissal of former Biafrans from the Nigerian public service to retirement, my immediate feeling was that he was desperately trying to isolate, defuse or diffuse the threat to "actualise the sovereign state of Biafra." Later, however, my feeling moved away from cynicism to charity, to the hypothesis that he was trying to settle accounts with the Nigerian Civil War of (1967-1970). As a lover of history, or rather, as a passionate believer in the principle of settling account with history, I welcomed Obasanjo's move. But, again, I was assailed by "unpopular," if not dangerous, thoughts. Let me pick three of them as illustrations.

One: I felt that Obasanjo ought to have gone further to rehabilitate Gen Aguiyi-Ironsi, Nigeria's first military Head of State. **Two:** With what I know of Nigeria, I felt that this presidential pardon will soon lead to substantive revisions of the accounts of the Nigerian crisis and Civil War including the accounts previously given by the beneficiaries of Obasanjo's pardon. **Three:** Taking a long view of history I was not sure which one would be more significant: Col. Ojukwu of the Nigerian Army or Gen.

Ojukwu of the Biafran Army or Chief Ojukwu, Ikemba Nnewi. These, definitely, are not the type of thoughts to start propagating at a time of jubilation over the presidential act of "final reconciliation." I therefore decided to suspend any comment on the subject until my thoughts on the subject became more disciplined and "patriotic." I stood by this personal censure until I came upon two publications on related subjects.

The first publication is a biography of Maj.-Gen. Thomas Aguiyi-Ironsi, Nigeria's first military Head of State. The book titled, *Ironsides*, was written by a Nigerian journalist, Chuks Iloegbunam, and published by Press Alliance Network Limited, London, in 1999. The second publication appeared as an extended opinion article on page 7 of *The Guardian* On Sunday issue of July 2, 2000. Titled: Is Obasanjo the president of all Nigerians?, the article was contributed by Enyeribe Onuoha. Iloegbunam's book was an effort to refute what the author regarded as falsehoods in official and non-official records of the life and acts of Gen. Ironsi, and by means of this, rehabilitate the late General. His book is the product of a research conducted over a 10-year period. Onuoha's article, on the other hand, was a denunciation of what is now known in public discussion as "marginalisation." The author was writing on the "marginalisation" of the Igbo ethnic group which he claimed has been going on since the end of the Civil War but has been intensified under the current Presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo. What struck me on reading these two publications was not just the "facts" they contain - some of which are quite alarming and have to be checked out - but the passion with which they were presented. It was this passion more than the "facts" that really disturbed me and inspired me to revisit President Obasanjo's attempt at settlement with history. I shall not review the two publications - at least not here - but will merely use them as points of departure, what we, journalists, call "pegs."

I shall first deal with the issue of "marginalisation." By the time political power was regionalised in Nigeria, that is, around 1950, three power-blocs had emerged. This emergence, nurtured and encouraged by British colonialism, was a definite defeat of militant nationalism in Nigeria: it is one of the roots of what we now call marginalisation. By 1960 when Nigeria became formally independent these blocs had

become entrenched. For convenience, let us call the blocs Kaduna, Ibadan and Enugu. Each of the blocs had an ethnic core which dominated the minority ethnic groups awarded it in the regional arrangement. The crisis of 1960 to 1966, together with the Civil War that followed was essentially a war of the power blocs- although I must hasten to add that other political forces, including minority and radical forces, intervened for various reasons, including the desire to seize the opportunity to correct historical wrongs and imbalances. The Igbo power-bloc was defeated in that war, and the victors are still in power, and will remain in power until Nigeria is reconstituted along popular-democratic lines. This reconstitution will end marginalisation, not only the marginalisation of Igbo ethnic group, but also the marginalisation of the popular masses across the land and the minority ethnic groups some of which the Igbo power-bloc oppressed before and during the Civil War.

My general position on the question of marginalisation is this: Any group or class that feels marginalised, or threatened, or cheated, or is disaffected should initiate a political struggle for restitution, and not believe that justice will be "awarded" without a struggle and the sacrifice, risks and pain that come with it. Appealing to Obasanjo, or even abusing him, cannot solve the problem. You must struggle and prepare to make sacrifices. But this position requires one important qualification or caveat: So long as we remain one country - and by this I stand - no group, however determined, can liberate itself in isolation. In Nigeria, marginalisation is historical and structural, and the structure is a national structure. It can be ended only through the restructuring and reconstitution of Nigeria along popular-democratic lines. My specific position on the question of Igbo marginalisation is to remind Onuoha that the Igbo power-bloc was defeated in war and simultaneously eliminated as a power-bloc. That is, the marginalisation of the Igbo ethnic group, as claimed, is the result of defeat and elimination as a power-bloc. The question therefore is whether Onuoha wants a democratic state, eliminating all power blocs or the re-establishment of the Eastern power bloc or indeed the rebirth of Biafra. Each choice is a call for struggle.

Now, to the second "peg" of this article: Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi. The Nigerian crisis and Civil War claimed many lives, millions of them. For the purpose of this intervention, the casualties can be separated into categories. There were political,

military and government leaders; there were armed vanguards, that is, people who initiated courses of armed actions and mobilised and led others; there were conscious activists who understood the conflicts in their various ways and took positions; there were innocent victims - many of them - and there were scape-goats, people who died because people simply had to die. There were other categories or sub-categories, but we can stop here. Of all the scape-goats or sacrificial lambs that the crisis and Civil War produced, one of the most prominent was Gen. Ironsi, the first indigenous Head of the Nigerian Army and the first Nigerian military Head of State.

Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary, once remarked that the most dangerous position to take in a conflict where the battle line is clearly drawn and the opponents are determined, is that of the **middle course**. Charting a middle course is different from sitting on the fence for while the latter is passive, the former is active. But in pictorial representation, the two are the same. For a person to sit on the fence in a conflict situation is dangerous enough because he or she may be eliminated by either side as a nuisance or obstacle, but to chart a middle course is extremely dangerous because being active and not passive, he or she will definitely be regarded by each side as supporting the other side. I am not concerned here with the correctness or otherwise of the middle course. All I am saying is that in a serious conflict, it is an extremely dangerous course. Gen. Ironsi's life and death as Nigeria's Head of State is a study in the tragedy of the middle course. However, if 30 years after the end of the (1966-70) crisis and war, Obasanjo for whatever reasons decided to pardon those who took up arms and were defeated, he ought to rehabilitate the man who tried, at a stage, to stem the crisis by charting a middle course, and died in the process.