

Chinua Achebe's Biafran Story

Since Arthur Ravenscroft's 1969 study for the British Council, more scholarly attention has been concentrated on Chinua Achebe than on any other African writer. In Achebe criticism, however, there has always been a sore thumb. Among the many critical studies, a central question has never been adequately answered: the place and meaning of Biafra for Achebe and his work. With the emergence of his Biafran war memoir *There Was a Country* more than forty years after the end of the conflict, the significance of that cataclysmic experience for Achebe can now be evaluated. This essay attempts to provide such an assessment by exploring the memoir alongside two pieces of writing produced by Achebe during the conflict itself. One of these, *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, is a story written for the children of Biafra and published in collaboration with the poet Christopher Okigbo. The other is the much more substantial and historically significant project that Achebe worked on in the same period. A radical political manifesto for Biafra, *The Ahiara Declaration* never bore Achebe's name as lead author, but rather that of the Biafran leader Emeka Ojukwu, whose defining political statement it became. Little examined as they are in the context of Achebe criticism, these three texts do much to illuminate the significance of the Biafran conflict for him, and the ways in which it changed his own sense of his function as a thinker and writer.

When the Society of Nigerian Authors met in January 1966 to honour their president at the launch of his fourth novel *A Man of the People*, it would be difficult to imagine a more assured and established writer than Chinua Achebe. From the young media professional who, in 1957, had hesitated to submit his first novel to a London publisher, Achebe had risen from obscurity to become the most celebrated author in Africa. The success of *Things Fall Apart* in particular—a novel that would sell over ten million copies and inspire hundreds of critical

studies—is well documented. In 1966, Achebe's reputation as one of the spearheads of African literary development did not only stem from the success of his own writings, however. As editor of Heinemann's *African Writers Series*, he was also a pivotal figure in the development of the new post-colonial canon that had already begun to institutionalise itself across anglophone Africa. According to the publishing entrepreneur Alan Hill in his memoir *In Pursuit of Publishing*, Heinemann at that time lacked the financial muscle of its rivals Longman and Oxford University Press, but had the advantage that it was much more reactive to the demands of African education ministries and examination boards, in the changed cultural conditions of Independence. The company's campaign for hegemony over the education market in Britain's former colonies hinged on its ability to build a credible portfolio of African writing suitable for distribution to African schools and colleges, and it was Achebe they relied on to select the writers and solicit the works that would form it.

In this historic role, it is worth noting, evidence suggests that Achebe suffered little ambivalence over the exercise of his power. Although the *African Writers Series* was supposed to represent African writing as a whole, from the outset its editor strongly favoured writers from his own ethnic background. As Hill writes, 'half of the first twenty English language novels in the AWS were written by Ibos from Eastern Nigeria' (124). A desire to develop writing from his homeland did not, however, prevent Achebe from subjecting his nation to a hard and un sentimental examination in his own writing. In *A Man of the People*, he mounts an unflinching critique of Nigerian public life, exposing the weaknesses, narcissism and corruption of both its political classes and intellectuals. As Achebe said in interview with Tony Hall for the Kenyan *Sunday Nation* the following January:

Right now my interest is in politics, or rather my interest in the novel is politics. *A Man of the People* wasn't a flash in the pan. This is the beginning of a phase for me, in which I intend to take a hard look at what we in Africa are making of our independence—but using Nigeria, which I know best.

(24)

As this interview makes clear, Achebe was working at that time on ideas for a fifth novel extending the political analysis developed in *A Man of the People*. Within a year, however, that project had completely stalled. Indeed, it was twenty years before Achebe would be able to complete another novel. An event intervened—the Biafran War—that fundamentally disrupted his writing career, re-aligning his understanding of nationhood, Independence and the condition of postcoloniality.

Beginning formally in July 1967, the war centred over the decision of Nigeria's Igbo-dominated Eastern Region in May of that year to secede as an independent nation. Over the previous twelve months, the Igbo and other Easterners had been the targets of a campaign of ethnic violence which extended across Nigeria and which was—Achebe and many others believed—systematically co-ordinated by elements within the Nigerian establishment. By the time of secession thousands of Igbo business people, professionals and their families, who had settled outside their traditional homeland in the South East, had fallen victim to the wave of ethnic bigotry. As a direct result of the violence, reverse migration on a mass scale had concentrated Easterners back in Igboland and its surrounding territories. As Achebe writes in *There Was a Country*, the governmental response to these mass ethnic pogroms was one of brazen inaction. Among the Igbo themselves, suspicion was fuelled that a Northern and Islamic-led movement was underway to eliminate them as an economic and political force in Nigeria. According to Achebe:

Thirty thousand civilian men, women, and children were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands were wounded, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned—and no one asked any questions. A Sierra Leonean living in Northern Nigeria at the time wrote home in horror: 'The killing of the Igbos has become a state industry in Nigeria.'

What terrified me about the massacres in Nigeria was this: If it was only a question of rioting in the streets and so on, that would be bad enough, but it could be explained. It happens everywhere in the world. But in this particular case a detailed plan for mass killing was implemented by the government—the army, the police—the very people who were there to

protect life and property. Not a single person has been punished for these crimes. It was not just human nature, a case of somebody hating his neighbor and chopping off his head. It was something far more devastating, because it was a premeditated plan that involved careful coordination, awaiting only the right spark. (82-3)

During the civil war itself, as his memoir records, a further three million Igbo were to die. International coverage of Nigeria's offensive against the secessionists, including groundbreaking photojournalism in high profile publications such as *Time* magazine, was accompanied by widespread popular protest, including in London, calling for the cessation of hostilities and the observance of human rights. A key focus of this campaign was to put pressure on Harold Wilson's Labour government in Britain, as the leading supplier of arms to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, to change its policy of active support for what many observers (including Richard Nixon) described as a campaign of genocide. As governmental accounts, recording continuous arms exports from Britain to Nigeria show, however, this campaign was unsuccessful.

One of the most highly publicised effects of Britain's unwavering support for Nigeria's war was the total blockade of food and medical supplies to the East that it made possible. As a roving ambassador for Biafra, frequently visiting London to build support for his fledgling nation, Achebe was able to see at first hand the intensity of public feeling among ordinary British people about the human costs of the British policy. Quite clearly, Wilson was willing to risk significant political damage by sustaining his rigidly partisan stance. Within the Wilson administration, as I will show, concern was certainly voiced about the rightness of British policy, but publically, the commitment of the UK government to aid Nigeria in its goal of crushing the Biafrans was unwavering. As Achebe writes:

Harold Wilson's government soon found itself awash in a public relations nightmare at home and abroad. Wilson personally accused Ojukwu of attempting to garner sympathy by exploiting the casualties of a war to which his government was supplying arms! The bombing of civilian targets

in Biafra by the Nigerian air force made the evening news and appeared in the major newspapers in Great Britain and 'stirred a hornet's nest' of outrage from the British people. Things were so tense that British dockworkers reportedly refused to load ships with British arms heading for Lagos, protesting that they were being used to kill 'Biafran babies.' (100-1)

During the course of the conflict, there is little dispute over the fact that the vast majority—over two and a half million—of the victims of Nigeria's blockade of Biafra were children who died of malnutrition-related illnesses such as kwashiorkor or of outright starvation. As Achebe suggests, moreover, there is no doubt that Wilson's administration ran the gauntlet of public opinion by continuing to encourage and facilitate the Nigerian action. One of the responses by Biafra itself to this apparently genocidal campaign was to provide unprecedented access to the international media, so that the horrific impact of the conflict on civilians could be publicised. Another important response, however, was to attempt to capture the political high ground by promulgating a defence of Biafra's legitimacy as an independent nation, in a formal statement of principles. This statement, *The Ahiara Declaration*, was delivered as an address by the Biafran Head of State Emeka Ojukwu and published under his name in June 1969. Achebe, however, was in fact its lead author, as his memoir reveals.

In the winter of 1968, Achebe writes, he was asked by Ojukwu to convene a group of writers and intellectuals to examine the cultural and political dimensions of Biafra's attempt to 'free itself from the faults it saw in Nigeria' (143). The questions the group set itself to answer were lofty indeed: 'How would we win this war and begin the creation of a new nation with the qualities we seek? What did we want Biafra to look like? What would be the core components of our new nation-state? What did we mean by citizenship and nationhood? What would be Biafra's relationship to other African countries? What kind of education would the general population need to aid Biafra's development?' (143-4). *There Was a Country* includes no detailed record of the exchanges that took place within this group. That its discussions were bold and productive is, however, clearly evidenced by the fact that having heard its initial

findings, Ojukwu asked Achebe to set up and chair a powerful governmental body, the National Guidance Committee, to write a constitution for Biafra. The document Achebe and his colleagues produced, *The Ahiara Declaration*, was designed to be 'a promulgation of the fundamental principles upon which the government and people of Biafra would operate' (144). Achebe's brief from the Commander-in-Chief was clear. 'The Biafran nation, Ojukwu explained, had to have special attributes—the very principles that we approved of and were fighting for: unity, self-determination, social justice, etc. The final version of this document, we hoped, would also tell our story to the world—how Biafra had been pushed out of Nigeria by Nigerians and threatened with genocide' (144).

In the *Declaration*, Britain's implacable determination to guarantee overwhelming military superiority for Nigeria is analyzed in terms of a simple equation. For Wilson's government, it suggests, the claims of basic economic self-interest, and especially an obsession with protecting Britain's oil rights in the Niger Delta, simply outweighed humanitarian concerns about the Igbo genocide. This attitude is set in the context of the British establishment's long track record of perpetrating or permitting mass violence in the furtherance of its material ambitions. 'The Anglo-Saxon British committed genocide against the American Indians. They committed genocide against the Caribbs. . . . They committed genocide against the native Tasmanians and the Maoris of New Zealand. During the era of the slave trade, they topped the list and led the genocidal attempt against the Negro race as a whole. Today, they are engaged in committing genocide against us' (18). Here, racial arrogance is seen as providing the framework for Britain's remorseless pursuit of its own advantage, both in the colonial era and afterwards. In the current context, however, the motivation for its proxy war against Biafra is ascribed to a much more specific concern—fear of losing control of its strategically crucial oil interests in the region. 'We now see why in spite of Britain's tottering economy Harold Wilson's government insists on financing Nigeria's futile war against us. We see why the Shell-BP led the Nigerian hoards into Bonny, pays Biafran oil royalties to Nigeria; and provided the Nigerian army with all the help it needed. . . . We see why the oil and trading companies in Nigeria still finance this war and why they risk the life and limb of their staff in the war zones' (16). Against Britain's violent pursuit of neo-colonial

self-interest, Biafra's resistance is represented as embodying the true spirit of independence:

Our struggle has far-reaching significance. It is the latest recrudescence in our time of the age-old struggle of the Black man for his full stature as man. We are the latest victims of a wicked collusion between the three traditional scourges of the black man—racism, Arab Muslim expansionism and white economic imperialism. Playing subsidiary role is Bolshevik Russia seeking for a place in the African sun. Our struggle is a total and vehement rejection of all those evils which blighted Nigeria, evils which were bound to lead to the disintegration of that ill-fated federation. . . . It is a positive commitment to build a healthy, dynamic and progressive state such as would be the pride of black men the world over. (7)

Throughout, the *Declaration* is bold in its insistence that the real struggle is not against Nigeria, even if it was Nigerian troops that daily threatened the lives of the people. The real target of the Biafran revolution, instead, is the abject condition of neo-colonial subordination that Nigeria represents. 'Nigeria is a stooge of Europe. Her independence was and is a lie' (18). For the British, concerned with nothing except the development of their oil interests, it suggests, only one model of Nigerian self-government could ever have been acceptable, that of a 'corrupt and rickety structure . . . in a perpetual state of powerlessness to check foreign exploitation' (14).

In his account of the Nigerian civil war in *There Was a Country*, Achebe captures the growing sense of fear among Biafrans during the conflict, not only related to their (ultimately unsuccessful) struggles to defend against the seemingly endless military resources poured in by Britain against them, but also the belief that the endpoint towards which the war was driving was the extermination of the Igbo. In the international media, this belief was openly aired. According to an editorial in the *Washington Post* in July 1969, which Achebe quotes:

One word now describes the policy of the Nigerian military government towards secessionist Biafra: genocide. It is ugly and extreme but it is the only word which fits Nigeria's decision to stop the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other relief agencies, from flying food to Biafra. (*There Was a Country*, 230)

By the time the war reached its mid-point, the view that a campaign of genocide was being waged against the Igbo in Biafra had become widely accepted in the US. Indeed, in 1968 it became one of the keynotes of Nixon's campaign for the presidency, as he struggled to engage with the concerns of the black vote. Achebe's memoir points to an address given by Nixon on 10 September of that year:

Until now efforts to relieve the Biafran people have been thwarted by the desire of the central government of Nigeria to pursue total and unconditional victory and by the fear of the Ibo [*sic*] people that surrender means wholesale atrocities and genocide. But genocide is what is taking place right now—and starvation is the grim reaper. This is not the time to stand on ceremony, or to 'go through channels' or to observe the diplomatic niceties. The destruction of an entire people is an immoral objective even in the most moral of wars. It can never be justified; it can never be condoned. (231)

In Achebe's writings both of the period and subsequently, however, the question of genocide is unfailingly connected to that of oil. In '1966,' the poem that introduces his 1972 collection *Beware Soul Brother*, for example, images of oil prospecting merge strikingly with ideas of coming violence and death, to the point at which they are entirely inseparable:

slowly downward in remote
subterranean shaft
a diamond-tipped
drillpoint crept closer

to residual chaos to
rare artesian hatred. . .

In Biafra it was common knowledge that after half a century of unsuccessful exploration, commercially exploitable reserves of crude oil had been discovered in 1956 in Olibiri in the Niger Delta, and that this had marking a turning point in Britain's colonial attitude towards the region. As Phia Steyn writes in an essay on early exploration efforts, the promise of significant oil production in South Eastern Nigeria had attracted intense interest among Western European powers in the late 1950s, primarily for the reason that it was regarded as being 'on the "right side" of the Suez canal' (266-7). During the Suez crisis of 1956, it had become clear to Britain and others that over-reliance on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf was a major strategic weakness. From that period, therefore, rapid development of oil production in Nigeria by British Petroleum, alongside the Dutch owned multinational now known as Shell Oil, became a political as well as an economic priority.

As a retrospective on the conflict in *Time* magazine in 1970 bluntly put it: 'Oil fuelled the Nigerian civil war. The major fields were in what was Biafra, and on them rested the region's hopes of sustaining an independent economy' (76). In this context, it is not difficult to see that from a British point of view, the secession of Nigeria's South East as the republic of Biafra in 1967 implied a clear potential threat to its interests. As British Foreign Office records from the period show, early Biafran successes in over-running the Nigerian mid-West in the name of true independence for Africans—with an advance on Lagos their next strategic priority—strongly intensified those concerns. In Achebe's words in *There Was a Country*, '[a]t first Biafra was successful and this alarmed Britain, the former colonial power, anxious for its big oil holdings' (100). Within the Wilson government, it was resolved that Britain's best interests lay with supporting Nigeria, the former dominion over whom it retained a substantial degree of influence, rather than Biafra, whose well-publicized commitment to shedding the neo-colonial yolk promised political and commercial difficulties. Almost from the beginning of the conflict, against both public opposition and dissent from within the establishment in London, arms and ammunition began to flow in

historically unprecedented quantities from Britain to the Nigerian Federation. As George (later Baron) Thomson at the Foreign Office wrote in secret and still unpublished correspondence sent on 4 December 1967 to Denis (later Baron) Healey in his role as Secretary of State for Defence, the sheer scale of demands on British military reserves and arms manufacturers represented a major challenge for the UK at that time. Arming Nigeria as vigorously as possible, however, promised several strategic advantages. 'I realize that a sudden demand of this kind is extremely difficult to meet, but as I see it . . . it would be greatly to our advantage to do whatever we can to meet it,' Thomson writes. Firstly, no serious dissent was envisaged within Wilson's cabinet in the face of economic priorities which had been well aired. Secondly, the initial 'shopping list' of arms received from Nigeria contained only requests for vehicles, shells and bullets, as opposed to less easily justifiable items such as war planes. As Thomson then goes on:

(c) There is no doubt that the F. M. G. [Federal Government of Nigeria] have had their fingers burned in other countries, and a favourable response . . . ought to give us every chance of establishing ourselves again as the main supplier of the Nigerian forces after the war . . . the Nigerian economy ought to be able to recover and start to expand again, and there should be valuable business to be done.

(d) Anything that we can do to assist the F. M. G. should help our oil companies to re-establish and expand their activities in Nigeria.

An initial strategic priority was to regain the oil-producing areas themselves from Biafran control. Once that was accomplished, a circular arrangement was established whereby Britain would pay revenues for oil it extracted in former Biafran territory to Lagos, which then used these funds to pay for British military ordnance.

While it cannot be said that Wilson's government pursued this policy entirely without compunction, it is evident that ethical misgivings voiced in London were insufficient to change government policy. As Foreign Office

minister Maurice Foley wrote in an unpublished letter to John (later Baron) Morris at the Ministry of Defence in January 1969:

We are none of us happy about having to go on providing arms and ammunition to Nigeria while the civil war continues with no immediate end in sight but the alternative is to set ourselves on the slippery slope towards the loss of the very extensive British interests in Nigeria.

On 13 November 1968, in an unpublished letter to Lord Malcolm Shepherd at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Morris had confirmed the supply of a further 6 Saladin armoured cars, 20,000 76mm artillery shells and 15,000,000 additional rounds of ammunition for small arms. By the end of that year, he records, the Ministry of Defence had supplied armaments to the Nigerian Federation 'equivalent to 60% of the British Army's total reserve stocks to meet its world-wide liabilities' even though, as he explicitly acknowledges, there had not been 'any objective assessment . . . whether these munitions are likely to be a conclusive factor in ending the fighting in Nigeria'. Associated correspondence between officials at the Ministry of Defence does evidence debate within governmental circles in the face of public revulsion at the apparently genocidal offensive Britain was supporting. On 22 Jan 1969, Morris's stance is discussed in internal correspondence between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Office of the Minister of Defence. In a secret memo, an unnamed aide warns that the minister was 'becoming increasingly restive on the subject of the supply of arms and ammunition to Nigeria [and] is now muttering darkly about either writing or going to see the Prime Minister himself.' In revealing commentary, Morris's concern is assessed by the civil servant as being 'a mixture of genuine moral indignation against what he considers to be an old colonialist policy on our part, the 'Conscience of the Left,' irritation with the inept way in which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office seems to be handling this subject (this is fully justified), and a wish to make a political splash on his own account.' In the same communication, a candid assessment is made of Britain's expected gains from facilitating Biafra's destruction:

Present British policy seems to be to provide conventional weapons and ammunition to Nigeria (on a rather more lavish scale than we would probably be keen to admit in public), in the knowledge that while this is not doing very much towards bringing the war to an end, Nigeria could almost certainly buy the stuff somewhere else if we didn't provide it, and by letting her have it we retain a certain degree of influence in Lagos and the possibility of emerging with good relations when Nigeria ultimately wins, thereby ensuring access to the oil reserves in East Nigeria.

Correspondence from John Morris to Lord Malcolm Shepherd, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and copied to Harold Wilson as Prime Minister, conveys the same impression: that political disquiet over the genocidal scale of the campaign would not be allowed to over-ride commercial interests. The position of Dennis Healey as Secretary of State for Defence, the records suggest, was that it was not his role to question the ethical implications of his ministry's own arms deals. As his parliamentary secretary J. F. Mayne writes on 12 November 1968, in a confidential note explicitly setting out the Secretary of State's position to his colleagues at the Foreign Office, 'Our role in any arms deal with Nigeria is that of supplying agents; the question of whether we ought or ought not to supply is one for the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to defend.'

On the ground four thousand miles to the south, the perceptions of Achebe and his contemporaries could hardly have been more different. Although Biafra was covertly assisted by airdrops from France and a few other allies, their defensive resources were dwarfed by the massive inflow of arms from Britain to the Nigerian Federation. By 1969, using aircraft purchased from the Soviet Union, British artillery and armoured vehicles, and guided by tactical advice from British officers on the ground, Nigeria had effected a complete land siege of the rebel territories. For Achebe and his family as Nigerian soldiers drew closer, as 'horrendous stories' spread 'of nurses and local women being raped and violated in unthinkable ways' (200), Britain's implacable pursuit of diplomatic and commercial advantage was felt in the most visceral way. While in London Morris, Foley, Healey and Wilson danced around each other resolving, by default,

to facilitate and underwrite Nigeria's war against the secessionists, Achebe's account brings home the human experience of that policy:

Gowon had succeeded in cutting Biafra off from the sea, robbing its inhabitants of shipping ports to receive military and humanitarian supplies. The afflictions marasmus and kwashiorkor began to spread farther, with the absence of protein in the diet, and they were compounded by outbreaks of other disease epidemics and diarrhea. The landscape was filled by an increasing number of those avian prognosticators of death as the famine worsened and the death toll mounted: *udene*, the vultures. By the beginning of the dry season of 1968, Biafran civilians and soldiers alike were starving. Bodies lay rotting under the hot sun by the roadside, and the flapping wings of scavengers could be seen circling, waiting, watching patiently nearby. Some estimates are that over a thousand Biafrans a day were perishing by this time, and at the height of Gowon's economic blockade and 'starve them into submission' policy, upward of fifty thousand Biafran civilians, most of them babies, children, and women, were dying every single month. (210)

For Achebe, an intellectual who had freely partaken of the optimism of Independence in 1960, when Nigeria had seemed to shake itself free from the bonds of colonialism, Biafra was a life-changing event. Indeed, in his memoir he calls the civil war 'a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa' (2). The relationship between Nigeria and many of its writers and intellectuals had begun to change long before Biafra's secession, however. In Achebe's own case, it was in the early 1960s that he began to perceive that Britain, the former colonial power had 'made certain on the eve of their departure that power went to that conservative element in the country that had played no real part in the struggle for independence' (52). Achebe's own protest at the progressive dissolution of political dialogue in postcolonial Nigeria was embodied by his 1966 novel *A Man of the People*, which partly dramatised the corrupt and increasingly tribalist struggle for power in Lagos during the elections of 1964 and 1965. The novel, even more than its predecessor *No Longer at Ease*, reads as

a desperate call for Nigerians to take charge of their destiny and resist the forces pushing their nation towards ruin. In theatre, Wole Soyinka's work was striking similarly anguished chords. In an essay on his work, the playwright and novelist Femi Osofisan describes being driven as a schoolboy to University College Ibadan to witness a series of political revues staged under the prescient title *Before the Blackout*. In a feverish atmosphere, he says 'I was captivated the fierce satirical portraits that Soyinka drew of well-known public figures, especially at that period in mid-1965, when the horrors of our politics were beginning to escalate' (176). In Achebe's analysis, artists and authors in this period were confronted with an unpalatable but inescapable problem. 'They found that the independence they had won was totally without content. In the words of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria was given her freedom 'on a platter of gold.' We should have known that freedom should be won, not given on a plate' (52).

In Frantz Fanon's work of the same period (*The Wretched of the Earth* was published in 1961 but not in an English edition until 1965), intellectuals in formerly colonised African countries are castigated along with the rest of the black middle class for their lack of commitment to genuine national renewal. Very much as Achebe suggests in *A Man of the People*, Fanon laments the lack of political understanding and commitment among the bourgeoisie in the newly independent nations, whose 'innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket' (120). The educated class, which should put its skills and knowledge at the disposal of the people, in fact has 'nothing more than an approximate, bookish acquaintance' (121) with their new nation and its resources. As *The Wretched of the Earth* goes on to argue:

Since the middle class has neither sufficient material nor intellectual resources . . . it limits its claims to the taking over of business offices and commercial houses formerly occupied by the settlers. The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement: doctors, barristers, traders, commercial travellers, general agents and transport agents. It considers that the dignity of the country and its own welfare require that it should occupy all these posts. From now on it will insist that all the big foreign companies should pass through its hands,

whether these companies wish to keep on their connexions with the country, or to open it up. The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary.

Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neocolonialism. (122)

In Biafra, with Ojukwu's strong encouragement, Igbo intellectuals and writers, with Achebe at the forefront, made a serious attempt to address this challenge afresh. Soyinka, who was Yoruba and from the South West (as opposed to Igboland and an Easterner like Achebe) made an attempt to coordinate an anti-war movement on both sides of the conflict, enlisting the support of Biafrans, Nigerians and many other public figures. In 1967 he was arrested without charge by Nigeria's Federal Military Government. Despite a high-profile, international campaign for his release, he was held in solitary confinement until almost the end of the war. The historian Kenneth Onwuka Dike, who had founded and directed the Nigerian National Archives in the 1950s, used his expertise as former vice chancellor at Ibadan to help set up the University of Biafra.

In Achebe's account, the new nation was named a 'Republic' in full consciousness of that word's meaning. It was to be 'a state in which the supreme power rests in the body of citizens entitled to vote and is exercised by representatives chosen directly or indirectly by them' (143). When Ojukwu asked Achebe to convene a group of intellectuals to codify the principles Biafra was to embody, many leading thinkers welcomed the opportunity to put their talents at the service of their nation.

The historian Chieka Ifemesia brought expertise on British colonialism in Nigeria and, like Achebe, was a strong advocate for the inclusion of indigenous African political thought. Ikenna Nzimiro was an expert in Igbo traditional culture. In *The Education of a British Protected Child* and elsewhere, Achebe has written extensively of the democratic dynamics of traditional culture among the Igbo before colonialism, and it is evident in *The Ahiara Declaration* that the

group wanted that meritocratic and egalitarian ethos to be clearly reflected in Biafra's defining statement. Emeka Aniagolu was a Justice who was to become one of the most renowned lawmakers in West Africa. Ifegwu Eke, Biafran Minister of Information, was a young intellectual who had received his doctorate in agricultural economics at Harvard in 1966. Eyo Ndem was a political sociologist formerly of the University of Nigeria. The committee secretary, Emanuel Obiechina, was a literary historian specialising in indigenous West African literatures. Biographer Ezenwa-Ohaeto records that as chairman, Achebe was mandated by Ojukwu to co-opt any member of the public to give evidence before the committee. Chukwuemeke Ike, the novelist who would write an evocative portrait of idealism, violence and violation in the Biafran war in *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), was one of those called. In interview, Ifemesia reveals interesting detail about Achebe's committee and the dialogic way it pursued its work:

[E]verything about the community was discussed, with people making suggestions. Recommendations were also made which people took home to their units. The meeting of the committee was a two-way thing for the members also brought recommendations from their units. Ojukwu as the Patron always attended the meetings. There is scarcely any meeting he did not attend. (Ohaeto, 140)

As Chukwuma Azuonye recalls in his later 'Reminiscences' (1989), a tangible creative excitement surrounded the community of Umuahia while *The Ahiara Declaration* was in the process of being composed. 'With the fall of Aba,' he writes, authors and artists 'converged at New Town Tavern, Umuahia, where we held many fruitful poetry reading sessions over palm wine, chicken and *odudu*. Umuahia gave birth to some of the finest poetry of the civil war.' Writers and artists braved Nigerian air raids over the town which 'had become menacingly more frequent and intense with gruesome bombing and strafing of Biafran towns' (Azuonye 23, quoted by Ohaeto 141). Amid the mounting violence, Achebe writes in his memoir, 'an explosion of musical, lyrical, and poetic creativity and artistry' (151) overtook Biafra. On the day in June 1969 when

Ojukwu delivered *The Ahiara Declaration* as a public address, Achebe recalls his brother Frank's description of the event, '*odika si gbabia agbaba*' [it was as if we were dancing to his words]. His account captures the moment with simple intensity. 'People listened from wherever they were. It sounded right to them: freedom, quality, self-determination, excellence. Ojukwu read it beautifully that day' (149).

During the Biafran conflict, nevertheless, Achebe himself found that he was hardly able to function as a creative writer, producing only a handful of short poems over the entire course of the conflict. Indeed, the only substantial work published bearing Achebe's name during the civil war was the children's story *How the Leopard Got His Claws*. Soon after the beginning of the war, he and the poet Christopher Okigbo began to discuss the importance of providing educational materials for Biafran children, and the lack of suitable stories available for them. In an entrepreneurial spirit, the two men founded the Citadel Press in a small building in Enugu partly to address this need. Among the first manuscripts they received was a story by the established children's author John Iroaganachi, based on the proverb 'How the Dog Became a Domesticated Animal,' and in an editing job that became a fundamental rewriting, this was the text that became *Leopard*. Across sub-Saharan Africa, there are many iterations on the popular tale Iroaganachi had chosen. The central motif they hinge on, as Ernest Emenyonu writes, is that of a dog who is forced out of the animal community because of his too-trusting nature, and accepts domestic subordination in the house of man. For Achebe and Okigbo, the metaphors of this narrative, and in particular the central theme of the dog's subservience, seemed ill suited to the conditions of their times. While Okigbo became more and more involved in armed struggle against the Nigerian Federation (he was killed in action defending the city of Nsukka in 1967) Achebe set to work to transform the manuscript into something very different. In his final published text (in which he and Iroaganachi are cited as joint authors) the dog who is destined to be domesticated is marked out from the other animals, not for his loyalty or gullibility, but for his sharp teeth and selfish nature. The tale is set in an Edenic space in which even the leopard, who rules gently and wisely over the forest, has

no need for teeth or claws. When rain begins to fall, the animals work together to build themselves a fine common shelter:

The tortoise copied the pattern on his back and made the plan of the roof. The giant rat and the mouse dug the foundation. Some animals brought sticks, some ropes; others made roof mats. As they built they built the house, they sang many happy songs. They also told many jokes. Although they worked very hard, everyone was merry. After many weeks, they finished the building. It was a fine building. The animals were pleased with it. They agreed to open it with a very special meeting. On the opening day, the animals, their wives, and their children gathered in the hall. King leopard then made a short speech. He said: 'This hall is yours to enjoy. You worked very hard together to build it. I am proud of you.' (N.Pag.)

The dog, who in Achebe's text is savage and self-seeking, takes no part in building the common shelter, but uses his superior fighting strength to seize it for himself once it has been completed. In so doing, he bites and claws the leopard, who slinks away into the forest, covered with blood.

Thus far in the narrative, which Achebe re-titled *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, it is not difficult to see how his version allegorises the Biafran story. In Achebe's perception, as we have seen, tribalist elements which had taken little part in the forging of independent Nigeria had ended up taking that 'common shelter' by force, wounding and exiling those who had helped to make it a reality. In this sense, what Achebe does next with his narrative comes as something of a surprise. Instead of having the animals follow their gentle king into exile, Achebe depicts them gathering obsequiously around the dog:

The tortoise stood up and said, 'I am sure we are all sorry about what happened to the leopard. But he was foolish to talk to the dog the way he did. It is foolish to annoy such a powerful person as the dog. Let us make peace with him. I don't know what you others think. But I think he should have been our king all along. He is strong; he is handsome. Let us go on our knees and salute him'.

As he retreats into the forest, the other animals pursue and willingly stone the leopard. In order to restore his position of power, it is therefore the peace-loving, exiled leopard who resolves to call on man—in the person of a blacksmith—and with his help, to arm himself with a fearsome array of metal teeth and claws. Savaging the dog and throwing him out of the community, the leopard turns in anger to the other animals: ‘You miserable worms. You shameless cowards. I was a kind and gentle king, but you turned against me. From today I shall rule the forest with terror. The life of the forest is ended.’ The animals are forced to pull apart their shelter, with each carrying away the part he had contributed. Fearful of the leopard, the dog also turns to man, selling himself into slavery for the protection of the hunter. As the story ends, the animals are locked in conflict, killing each other and suffering death at the hunter’s hands.

From a critical point of view, what is particularly striking about the narrative turns in *Leopard* is the ambivalence they hint at—something rigorously excluded from *The Ahiara Declaration*. In young children’s fiction, generic conventions that are almost universally observed include the requirements that justice is seen to be done and that the young reader is offered clear closure. Even on the literal level, however, *Leopard* signally fails to satisfy these expectations, closing instead on a note of disquiet. On the level of its allegorical commentary on the Biafran struggle, similarly, what Achebe’s story imparts is a clear sense of unease about the course of the civil war and the trajectory on which the secessionists had set themselves. Instead of shedding his unnatural weapons when the need for them had passed by, the leopard is shown as consumed with implacable, self-destructive resentment. As for the dog, while in the huntsman’s company he will be free to feed on the flesh of his fellow animals, he trades this privilege for slavery, and will never be able to consort with them again except on a murderous basis. Locked in conflict, Achebe presents the animals as united only by their inability to resist the power of ‘their common enemy’, the hunter. By contrast to the society of harmony and principle conjured by *The Ahiara Declaration*, in other words, the vision *Leopard* offers is that of a utopia destroyed by forces of selfishness, cowardice and revenge on all

sides. With the help of the invader man, the animals have not only destroyed each other, but passed up their opportunity for freedom.

The sense of disquiet, or ambivalence that shines through Achebe's writing in *Leopard* is something that, after the end of the conflict, he was to meditate on in depth. There is no doubt that, during the war itself, he had become deeply enmeshed in Ojukwu's regime, and not only in relation to the writing of *The Ahiara Declaration*. As his memoir records, he was also co-opted to a propagandist operation known as the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF), whose brief was to mediate a positive image of the Biafran army to its people. The Republic was, from the very outset, a society focused on violent resistance, and as the Chief Secretary to the Government of Biafra Ntiyong Udo Akpan writes in a retrospective account of the conflict, its actions were by no means always defensible. When minority communities in the Niger Delta were suspected of aiding the advance of the Federal forces, for example, 'not only were refugees from such areas molested, but even those of their people already in Biafra and actively helping in the war effort were suspected and sometimes harassed' (157). In the border areas themselves:

Whole villages were burnt and individuals murdered . . . and it was quite shocking to know those who were the actual leaders of the bloody and destructive rampage—professional men, university lecturers, and others. The Governor [Ojukwu] himself gave at least tacit approval to these acts of brigandage. (157)

In the Delta town of Igrita, soon after the fall of the strategically important Port Harcourt, Akpan recalls being 'terribly shocked by the number of bodies being carted into mass graves—bodies of persons not killed by bullets but by cruel handling' (157). Achebe was, as we have seen, an experienced media professional. However, his brief within BOFF to develop an 'education strategy' (159) aimed at the ideological harmonization of the military and the people must necessarily have implied some ethical challenges. In *There Was a Country*, the writer is notably brief in his account of his work within the organization, as well as keen to distance himself from its activities. Only '[a]fter I left the BOFF outfit,'

he claims, did he become aware 'that it was engaged in the more militaristic and controversial aspects of war, such as enemy infiltration, guerilla warfare, and propaganda' (160).

Asked in an interview with Kaly Ogbaa about the Biafran experience as late as 1980, the ambivalence we see both here and in *Leopard* was something Achebe had yet to resolve:

In a revolutionary situation, in a situation of great danger, in an institution and regime of violence, for instance, what does a creative artist do? . . . I decided that I could not stand aside from the problems and struggles of my people at that point in history. And if it happened again, I would not behave differently.

But there are limitations, you know. For instance, in that kind of situation there is bound to be pressure to think alike. There is bound to be pressure, maybe, to surrender some of your cherished ideals. There may even be the danger . . . of forgetting that art is not 'brother' to violence. . . . It's tricky to get onto that situation. I cannot say more than I have said, but I'll simply say again that an artist has to have his wits about him because he is stepping into a very dangerous domain. (71)

Soon after the end of the war, Achebe returned to the offices of the Citadel press in Enugu, a city that, having been named Biafra's capital after secession, had fallen to the Federal forces in October 1967. Amid the other buildings that stood unscathed by the conflict, he describes how his company's modest premises had been 'pummeled into the ground,' their constituent parts scattered and 'pulverized as if with a jackhammer' (185). For Achebe:

It was the work of someone or some people with an ax to grind. It appeared as if there was an angry mission sent to silence the Citadel—for having the audacity to publish *How the Leopard Got His Claws*—a book that challenged the very essence of the Nigerian Federation's philosophy. . . . Having had a few too many homes and offices bombed, I walked away from the site and from publishing forever. (185)

Feeling that he could no longer live in a country whose reckless violence he had witnessed at first hand, Achebe went into exile with his family in the United States. In 1972, resolving that he could no longer carry the mantle for African literary development, he relinquished editorship of *The African Writers Series*. Interviewed by Onuora Ossie Enekwe for *Okike* in 1976 on his return to Nigeria six years later, Achebe reported on progress with another novel project which, once again however, he was unable to bring to completion. In the wake of the civil war, he told Enekwe, his main struggle was with ‘the problem of finding the kind of emotional and artistic stability—peace of mind, if you like—that is needed’ (53). It was a further ten years before he was able to break his novelist’s block.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon had called for the new, University educated class in formerly colonized nations ‘to put itself to school with the people,’ (120) dedicating their talents and subordinating their ambitions to the achievement of national regeneration. As a writer who had frequently used the language of ‘commitment’ and spoken of the social obligations of intellectuals, Achebe was provided with an opportunity in Biafra to rise to Fanon’s challenge, and to test his principles in practice. As a trusted member of Ojukwu’s regime, he was privileged to help shape and articulate the core values of an idealistic new nation, as it struggled to invent and sustain itself. What is also clear from his memoir, as well as writings and interviews of the time, however, is that both personally and professionally, the Biafran experience took an enormous toll. In the early 1960s, Achebe had seemed the epitome of productive, committed creativity, unflinchingly determined to redeem his people from colonialism’s damaging and demeaning legacies. Out of Biafra, he emerged as a much more troubled and conflicted figure.

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