

Review Essay

Title: *We Are All Biafrans: A Participant-Observer's Interventions in a Country Sleep Walking to Disaster*

Author: Chido Onumah

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"The Crazy World of Nigeria"

Faith is a Nigerian. That is why the average Nigerian response to the question: "How are you" is "We thank God", "I bless God" or "*Alhamdulillah*". Symbolisms of serendipity and the divine loom large in our leadership choices and political economy. A recent President had a name that rhymed with "Doer" and was married to a wife whose name is redolent of a popular Satellite phone brand, Thuraya. He was succeeded by a President whose first name guaranteed luck in abundance, accompanied by a wife named Patience. The irony of why a doer needs a satellite phone or why a man with all the goodluck in the world needs it garlanded with patience escapes us all. Before them was a President who claimed to have "walked through the valley of the shadow of death." After them, numerologists busied themselves with the significance of the fact that the current President was returned to office, on All Fools Day, 30 years after his first stint.

Preoccupied as we always are with extracting the divine from the mundane and addicted to a dependency on the Almighty, the country appears to be “sleepwalking to disaster.” This is the sub-title of the Chido Onumah’s latest book *We Are All Biafrans*, published 50 years after the birth of the author to parents who came from the secessionist territory of Biafra to which the title pays homage. Anyone who thinks, however, that this title is about breaking up Nigeria would be mistaken. The author is an unapologetic Nigeriaphile who believes only urgent action to re-balance the country will save his beloved country from implosion.

Unsurprisingly, the author lays out a clear premise in his personal experience for this voyage of essays:

My parents are from Imo State in south-east Nigeria. I wasn’t born there. I didn’t grow up there. I live and work in Abuja and I am married to a lovely woman from Ogun State in south-west Nigeria. Yet I have to “claim” Imo State because in the crazy world of Nigeria, your “state of origin” confers on you certain privileges and opportunities, depending on what you are looking for and where you find yourself. I am sure there are millions of Nigerians who share my unease.¹

This book is an appeal to those “millions of Nigerians” who share the author’s unease about the “crazy world of Nigeria” to remake a country in which they can all coexist as equal citizens. It is, therefore, a passionate argument for those things he believes could be done to save his country and a no-holds-barred declamation of the tendencies, institutions and people who stand in the way of achieving these.

¹ *We Are All Biafrans*, p. 44

Will Nigeria Disintegrate?

An essayist, journalist, and activist who has previously moonlighted as a public servant, Mr. Onumah develops in this latest book arguments that he has flagged in a previous volume concerning the Nigerian federation and the need to make it a more just and equitable federation. This book is thus best read as a sequel to his last volume, *Nigeria is negotiable*.

We Are All Biafrans is a collection of 43 articles organized in five chapters all authored since 2013. It addressed contemporary and perennial problems of Nigeria's political economy, including the nature of the federation, the need to restructure it and the challenge of democratic leadership. The first chapter contains nine essays focused on "the politics of 2015" general elections, including, in particular, the emergence of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and of General Muhammadu Buhari as its candidate in the election as well as the challenges that they had to confront. From here, the book works its way back to Nigeria's perennial problems which made the 2015 elections so riveting. Chapter two addresses Nigeria's habit of "Dancing on the Brink" in four hard-hitting articles that focus on the question whether or not the country would survive and if so in what form or process. In Chapter three, the book explores the "Unmaking o Nigeria" in five essays that each and all make the point in different ways that the existence and sustainability of the country cannot be taken for granted. Chapter four contains 17 essays on sundry "Scoundrels and Statesmen" (and women) who exemplify Nigeria's leadership crisis. The final chapter contains eight of the most recent essays by the author dealing with various aspects of Nigeria's "Missionary Journey" including, military exceptionalism, that is the fact that "for as long as I can remember, persons in uniform in Nigeria have always assumed that they are superior to other Nigerians."² Some cases of abuse by the military, Zaria Massacre

² *Ibid.*, p. 174

Preceding these, the prologue by Edwin Madunagu, the Marxian, Mathematics Professor and essayist from the University of Calabar, dwells on "Settling Accounts with Biafra". Following them, three appendices publish transcripts of interviews done by the author on various aspects of the Nigerian pathology including violence and corruption.

Essentially, this book addresses three basic arguments not necessarily in the logical order of its chapter plan or chronology. First, the book asserts that Nigeria is a colonial invention "founded on injustice."³ Few would disagree that colonialism was an injustice or that that injustice created territories to perpetuate itself. But the author rightly points out that "Nigeria is not the only country that was 'created' for economic and imperialistic reasons." Unlike the others, however, we seem to have failed to create what he calls a "functional state" but rather remain largely a collection of ethnicities defined by profound asymmetry between the ethnicities or ethnic groups and the federating units which are the States. "After 100 years", he laments, "it is time we stopped seeing ourselves as Yorubas, Igbos, Hausas, Ijaws, Efiks, Ibibios, Fulanis, Tivs, and everything in between. It is time we began seeing ourselves as Nigerians."⁴

However, secondly, the author admits this will not be easy and concedes that it is indeed possible that "there is nothing sacrosanct about Nigeria" and that "Nigeria will disintegrate unless we collectively do something about it."⁵ Recalling martyred former Attorney-General of the Federation, Bola Ige, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) whose assassination in his home in 2001 remains unsolved, the author asserts that "there are two basic questions that must be answered by all Nigerians. One, do we want to remain as one country? Two, if the answer is yes, under what conditions?"⁶ In his opinion, the country now confronts three options:

³ *We Are All Biafrans*, p. 38

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74

“either it degenerates into anarchy (Liberia and Somalia) or disintegrates (Yugoslavia and Soviet Union), or the whole nation meets to save itself.”⁷ The author concedes that “it might be difficult for Nigeria to disintegrate into ethnic republics” but warns that “the Somalianization” of Nigeria is a “clear and present danger.”⁸ Tantalising as this point is, the book stops short of fully developing the threat of “Somalianization” and what it could look like. The ethnic cartography of Nigeria and historic inter-marriage among ethnicities makes it somewhat difficult to sustain the comparison with Somalia which comprises only Somalis. That said, however, the author’s preferred outcome for Nigeria is a National Conference that fully develops the bases for Nigeria’s co-existence.

Part of the reason for Nigeria’s failure in constructing a functional state, thirdly, is our collective tendency towards convenient amnesia. Nigeria, the author argues, “has not engaged with” those that it excludes.⁹ According to him:

Nigeria has not engaged with Biafra and there is a lot that is still unresolved about the civil war. But it’s not just Biafra and that tumultuous period of our history. There is a lot that is unresolved about Nigeria as a whole and about many aspects of our existence as a country. Nigeria has not engaged with June 12, just as we have not engaged with Boko Haram, to mention only two of the more recent episodic convulsions that threaten the very foundation of the country. In a sense, the Biafra experience could be a metaphor for the many unresolved problems that confront us as a country.¹⁰

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.68

No One's Barn

The author is uncompromising in his use of language, analysis and descriptions. He damns Nigeria's national legislature as a "do-nothing National Assembly";¹¹ inveighs against "the egregious folly of those who think this piece of real estate called Nigeria is their grandfather's barn",¹² and bemoans that "governance in Nigeria is a big scam because the nation Nigeria, as presently constituted, is a great fraud."¹³ Concerning former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida and recent civilianized President, Olusegun Obasanjo, the author says they "remind one of the devils in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, who commit murder and then don their robes of pity and go to wipe the tears from the faces of orphans and widows."¹⁴ Elsewhere in the book, he dismisses President Obasanjo as "narcissistic"¹⁵ and adds that "Obasanjo has outlived his usefulness."¹⁶ Former First Lady, Patience Jonathan, is the subject of one essay titled "Her Excellency, Madam President".¹⁷ Of the former ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), he warns that its "implosion is imminent because of its insufferable worthlessness."¹⁸ Even those who disagree with some of the judgements and opinions communicated by the author will acknowledge and respect his passion and the fact that he cares about his country, deeply.

The fact that we are launching this book without trouble shows progress

The author's panacea is largely encapsulated in one sentence: "we can build civic nationalities where ethnic nationalities currently exist."¹⁹ As earlier pointed

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74

out, he evinces that this can be done by a national conference which will be sovereign. While many people will not necessarily disagree with the possibility of a National Conference, however, bringing about a sovereign one is difficult. The author acknowledges this but does not fully wrestle with the problematics of how to overcome the political and institutional obstacles, merely claiming that “the military decree which passes as the 1999 constitution... is not worth the paper it is printed on.”²⁰ It is indeed true that the 1999 Constitution is a schedule to a military decree but there is now a political reality around its existence that the proponents of a sovereign national conference must deal with.

This tendency to avoid the specific with a generalization, is at the heart of the main problems with the recommendations pursued by the book. For instance, elsewhere in the book the author had argued “for a moratorium on the general elections scheduled for February 2015”²¹ But it remains unclear how such a moratorium would have worked or alleviated the problem of a disintegrating country which is what he wanted it for.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the book, however, is in the courage of its title which succeeds in taking the word “Biafra” out of the closet by deploying it as a metaphor or straw for addressing the subject matter of the inherently exclusionary, anti-majoritarian and anti-utilitarian tendencies of Nigeria’s political economy. Ingeniously, the author converts “Biafra” into a forensic tool for auditing the Nigerian state. The outcome is not reassuring. Some may see this rather negative or despondent. In the hands of this author, however, the outcome is a challenge to Nigerians that invites us all to take a state in remaking a great country. On the whole, *We Are All Biafrans* makes a compelling case for taking Nigeria and its various centrifugal tendencies seriously. If his goal was a retrospective on his first 50 years on earth, then the author may well have assured through this work

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18

²¹ *Ibid.*, 49

that his country has a chance of surviving the next 50 years if only it can address some of the issues posed by *We Are All Biafrans*.