

## ***THERE WAS A COUNTRY: ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART REVISITED***

By

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The publication of Chinua Achebe's new book, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*, has in my opinion generated a lot of political criticisms on some of the issues raised in the text. The most topical are those that focus on the roles of General Gowon and Obafemi Owolowo in the civil war. I choose to use the expression 'civil war' and not Biafran war because the notion of Biafran war seems to imply that Biafra waged a war with herself, whereas the notion of civil war points to the fact that a section of one country waged a war against another section of the same country, which is exactly what happened in the Nigerian situation. This interpretation is consistent with the idea of "There was a country."

Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria's foremost literary artists was the first to use the expression "Things Fall Apart" within the context of African literary discourse and output. But in the world's literary arena, the expression is traceable to William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming." The text reads: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The Falcon cannot hear the Falconer. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ...." In Nigeria's literary history Achebe was the first to use the expression and since then he has been revered as the 'father' of Things Fall Apart. Achebe in his own usage of the expression used it with a different context and connotation from Yeats.

The book, *Things Fall Apart*, was published in 1958 prior to Nigerian Independence. It has been seen as the archetypical modern African novel in English. It has also remained a staple book in schools throughout Africa and widely read and studied in English-speaking countries around the world. The novel depicts the life of Okonkwo, a community leader and local wrestling champion in Umuofia – one of a fictional group of nine villages in ancient Nigeria, inhabited by Ibo (Igbo an anglicised form) people. It focuses on his family and personal history, the customs and society, and the influence of British colonialism and Christian Missionaries on the Igbo community during the late nineteenth century.

Most literary commentators and critics have always read Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in terms of the clash between Western colonial culture and African indigenous culture as what brought about the 'falling apart of things' such that the centre could no longer hold; hence the title of the book. While there might be some elements of convincing arguments from the text to support this reading, the interpretation seems to fly from the reality that Achebe presents at the end of the book.

The aim of this essay is to attempt a more refreshing reading of the meaning of the title of Achebe's *Things fall Apart* and to show how the same literary organizing principle that informed *Things Fall Apart* is still the ploy of *There was a country*. And just as *Things Fall Apart* focused on the family and personal history of Okonkwo, so has *There was a country*, focused on the family (Igbo family) and personal history of Igbo people represented by Achebe. What then was it that fell apart that warranted the title of the book? Why is Achebe writing about a country that only was?

The central argument of this essay is that the full meaning of the title of the book *Things Fall Apart* and the dramatic source of the caption of the novel is to be found in the reason for Okonkwo, the arch character's decision to pay the ultimate price by committing suicide. Okonkwo's action is argued to have been a revolt against what he perceived as the internal disintegration of Umuofia; and that same internal disintegration is argued to have been reason for the collapse of Biafra in *There was a Country*.

Chinua Achebe like all human beings who have the capacity to associate with other human beings is a political animal but he is not a politician. If he were a politician he would not have had the courage to twice refuse a National honour from a country he has judged to be unruly, and directionless. In my assessment he is more of a literary craftsman who imagines the activities of political actors and uses them for his narrative. His works I dare say should be read within that context. A careful reading of *There was a Country* shows that the text is not in any way different from Chinua Achebe's first text titled "Things fall Apart." In *There was a country* the characters of General Gowon, Ojukwu, Azikiwe, Awolowo and the rest of the personae mentioned play the same characteristic roles that Okonkwo, Unoka, Obierika, Egonwanne, Okoli, Okika and others played in *Things fall Apart*.

Another clarification that needs to be made is with regards to the title *There was a country*, "Which country?" Could it be the Nigerian country that survived as a country under the colonial rule, but ceased to be a country the moment it was offered independence on the platter of gold? That could have been the country that was. But with the formation of indigenous political parties and the attendant political betrayals, things had fallen apart and the centre could no longer hold hence the civil war. *There was a country*, Which country? It could mean the country that was called Biafra that fought to secede from Nigeria but eventually disintegrated not because of the military might of the Nigerian government but because of the internal betrayal and disaffection within the country that was called Biafra. Biafra disintegrated, things fell apart, the centre could no longer hold and the country that was, ceased to be. Achebe is perhaps right in saying that there was a Country. As the Chairman of the Committee that was charged with the responsibility of writing the Constitution of the new country, he definitely had an idea of an ideal country in his mind but given that the country whose constitution he drafted never saw the light of day he still remembers that there was a country that existed in his mind.

In *Things Fall Apart*, there was a clan called Umuofia, that was once the country of the brave who never shied away from war and never lost a fight but later because of internal betrayals and cowardly behaviour of the elders, Umuofia lost its glory. There is a great similarity

between the Umuofia spirit as depicted in speech of Okika at the village square in Umuofia (*Things Fall Apart*, Chapter 24) and the Ahiara Declaration. The speech of Okika captured the community's resolve to fight the intruding white men and their agents. But when the white man's court messengers arrived, the resolve of the Umuofia people waned. And the text concludes:

In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body. The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: "Why did he do it?" He (Okonkwo) wiped his machete on the sand and went away. (Last paragraph of Chapter 24)

What Okonkwo heard from the voices of the people precipitated his last public action. "He wiped his machete on the sand and went away" to commit suicide. He did this because things had fallen apart. The community could no longer stand by their decision. The centre represented by the unity of purpose could no longer be upheld. The turning around to blame Okonkwo, ("why did he do it?") for an action that he took on the basis of the communal decision was the high point of the communal betrayal. This internal betrayal was anticipated in the concluding speech of Okika when he said:

'All our gods are weeping, Idemilli is weeping. Ogwugwu is weeping. Agbala is weeping, and all others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes.' He stopped again to steady his trembling voice. 'This is a great gathering. No clan can boast of greater numbers or greater valour. But are we all here? I ask you: Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here?' A deep murmur swept through the crowd. 'They are not,' he said. 'They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. (Concluding speech of Okika *Things Fall Apart* Chapter 24)

Here in Okika's concluding speech is the echo of things falling apart. All the sons of Umuofia are not together. "They have broken the clan and gone their several ways." The central problem is the internal disintegration of the people. Okonkwo had taken the action believing that his people would follow his leadership and go to war against the intruders. But instead they backslided and allowed the other messengers to escape. For this cowardly act Okonkwo knew that Umuofia had ceased to be and he preferred to take his life than to succumb to the humiliation of the white man.

The Umuofia story and the Biafra story ended in the same melancholic diminuendo because of internal betrayals. Yes, for Okonkwo there was a clan that at the end of *Things Fall Apart* was no more. For Achebe, there was a country which he envisioned but at the end of the civil war, it ceased to be. What is more, given the present sorry state of the Nigerian country, looking back with some nostalgic feelings Achebe wished that a country that he envisioned or remembered could have been. Hence the title of the book: *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*. Yes, the story of Biafra however as it is told captures the story of the Nigerian country that never was and the story of Biafra that was envisioned but never realized. The country that was, was buried in the debris of the Nigerian civil war.

This internal fallen-ness seems to be a general characteristic of most African communities of nations. If this were not the case, one would have thought that after the end of colonialism or let us say the acquiring of independence, the centre would have begun to hold and things would no longer be falling apart. Rather the reverse seems to be the case. Since independence, there seems to have been progressively more fallen-ness and centres not holding in African communities than in the pre-colonial era. Thus we can see that Okonkwo's frustration was not against the colonialists but against his people who betrayed him by not being loyal to and consistent with the common decision they had taken.

Following the dynamic dramatics of *Things Fall Apart* as a typology, it is obvious that the defeat of Biafra (Eastern part of Nigeria that attempted to assert its right of self-determination) was not due to the military or political might of the Nigerian Government and its agents but due to two major internal factors; the internal betrayals from within Biafra and the attendant disintegration of its components. As noted by Achebe himself,

It is crucial to note that the decision of an entire people, the Igbo people, to leave Nigeria, did not come from Ojukwu alone but was informed by the desires of the people and mandated by a body that contained some of the most distinguished Nigerians in history: Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr. M.I. Okpara, Sir Francis Ibiem, Justice Louis Mbanefo, Dr. Alvan Ikoku, Joseph Echeruo, Ekukinam Bassey, Sam Mbakwe, Jerome Udoji and Margaret Ekpo. (There was a Country .... p.91)

Even though there is obviously a category error in the enumeration of the members that constituted the class "the entire Igbo people," that notwithstanding, one could imagine the disappointment and frustration that Ojukwu and the rest of Igbo people had when they discovered that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who was a former ceremonial president of Nigeria and a renowned Igbo political leader who led the group that advised Ojukwu to declare secession and was supposed to use his position and international connection to canvass support for Biafra had gone over to make peace with the Nigerian government even when the Nigeria-Biafra war was still being fought. The situation was heart-breaking for the Biafran war lord Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu in the tradition of Achebe's Okonkwo. The difference was that while Okonkwo could not stand the betrayal by the Umuofia Council of Chiefs who deserted him by reprimanding him for killing the colonial master's messenger, Ojukwu knew that suicide was not the answer, he preferred to escape and take refuge in a nearby African

country. With Azikiwe's betrayal of Igbo people and Ojukwu's betrayal and abandonment (by his escape) of the same Igbo people he had sworn to protect, things had fallen apart, the centre could not hold and General Efiang, having been betrayed and abandoned had no choice but to call a truce so that the war could end and the life of the abandoned people could be saved from the menacingly advancing Nigerian soldiers. Comparing the betrayals and the fallen-ness that led to the collapse of Umuofia clan, and the betrayals that led to the fall of Biafra, and the political and economic betrayals that have led to a traumatised and directionless country called Nigeria, Achebe has a justification in thinking that there was a country that is now no more. Perhaps this is his reason for consistently refusing to receive any National Award from a country that only existed in the past.

It would appear therefore that if one reads the text of *There was a country*, as a literary text in the tradition of *Things Fall Apart*, we can discover the genius that is in Achebe and not the ethnic bigot that one might be tempted to think of him. If Achebe's book, *There was a Country*, were written a hundred years from now when most of the memories of the Nigerian civil war would have been lost, most probably the text would pass for a mythical construct or fiction as *Things Fall Apart* is often thought of. The truth of the matter is that the story in *Things Fall Apart* was as real as Chinua Achebe could remember while the rest of us whose memory had failed have to base our knowledge of the ancient history on what Achebe could piece together. Just as the story in *Things Fall Apart* is the artist's art work at tailoring the oral and cultural history of a people to produce a somewhat thematic story of a people so is *There was a Country*, a cultural history of the Nigerian Civil war told from a peculiar perspective. In so far as a given narrative is a said thing limited to a peculiar perspective, there may never be an agreement with regard to the truth content. The actors and their roles are the artist's raw materials for intellectual tapestry or craftsmanship.

My take in this essay therefore is that we should read Achebe's new book as a literary treatise with political characters and not a text of political or ethnic bigotry. There is no need to seek to open old political wounds which are of no use to anybody. The civil war situation was a war situation. It is true that Igbos suffered from the Nigerian soldiers but consider the lot of the "minorities" within Biafra, they suffered from both the Biafran soldiers and the Nigerian soldiers. If there is to be reparation, justice demands that those who suffered from the two armies should be most compensated. But that is not our concern here. Our concern is how the country called Nigeria should move forward. Achebe's *There was a Country*, is a soul searching contribution to Nigeria's cultural history. It is the artist's way of raising the question "Where did we go wrong to have become such a degenerate country and a laughing stock of other nations?"

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