AWOLOWO AND THE FORGOTTEN DOCUMENTS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR.

By

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The most comprehensive and almost cover-all organization of the documents of the Nigerian Civil War remains AHM Kirk-Greene’s CRISIS AND CONFLICT IN NIGERIA, A Documentary Sourcebook 1966-1970 Volume 1, and Volume 2, published by Oxford University Press London, New York and Ibadan in 1971. Volume One, according to the blurb, “describes the prelude to the war and the succession of coups from that of 15 January 1966 which initially brought a military regime to power in Nigeria”. The volume takes the story up to July 1967 when the war began. Volume Two covers July 1967 to January 1970, that is, between the beginning of hostilities, and when, as testified by the last entry in the volume, General Yakubu Gowon made a Victory broadcast, The Dawn of National Reconciliation, on January 15, 1970. No other collection of civil war documents, to my knowledge, exists that compares with these two volumes. And none, as far as I know, has attempted to update or complement the publications so as to include or make public, other documents that are absent from Kirk-Greene’s yeoman’s job. Yet, as my title pointedly insists, there have been some truly ‘forgotten' documents of the Nigerian Civil War which ought to be added and without which much of the history being narrated will continue to suffer gaps that empower enormous misinterpretations, if not falsehoods.

In my view, the most forgotten documents of the Nigerian civil war, which deserved to be, but were not included in the original compilation by Kirk-Greene – are two. The first is the much talked-about, but never seen, Ifeajuna Manuscript. It was written by Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, the leader of the January 15, 1966 Coup that opened the floodgates to other untoward events leading to the civil war. The author poured it all down in the “white hot heat” of the first few weeks after the failed adventure that ushered in the era of military regimes in Nigeria’s history. Not, as many would have wished, the story of how the five majors carried out the coup. It is more of an apologia, a statement of why they carried out the coup, and what they meant to achieve by it. It is still unpublished, so many decades after it was written. The Manuscript had begun to circulate, very early, in what may now be seen as samizdat editions. They passed from hand to hand in photocopies, in an underground career that seemed fated to last forever, until 1985 when retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, after his first coming as Head of State, quoted generously from it in his biography of his friend, Major Chukuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, the man who, although, not the leader of the coup, became its historical avatar and spokesperson. Indeed, Nzeogwu's media interviews in the first 48 hours after the coup have remained the benchmark for praising or damning it. Ifeajuna's testimony fell into the hands of the military authorities quite early and has been in limbo. Few Nigerians know about its existence. So many who know about it have been wondering why the manuscript has not seen the light of day.

The other document, the second most forgotten of the Nigerian Civil War, has had more luck than the Ifeajuna Manuscript. It happens to be the transcript of the famous meeting of May 6th and 7th 1967, held at Enugu, between Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of Eastern Region, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Leader of the Yoruba and an old political opponent of the leaders of the Eastern Region. Awolowo attended the meeting at the head of a delegation of peace hunters in a bid to avert a shooting war after the pogrom against Easterners which presaged the counter-coup of July 29, 1966. The transcripts of the meeting, never publicly known to have existed, entered public discourse formally when a speech by Chief Obafemi Awolowo delivered on the first day of the meeting was...
published in a book, *Path to Nigerian Greatness*, edited by MCK Ajuluchuku, the Director for Research and Publicity of the Unity Party of Nigeria, in 1980. The speech seemed too much of a teaser. So it remained, until it was followed by *Awo on the Nigerian Civil War*, edited by Bari Adedeji Salau in 1981, with a “Foreword” by the same MCK Ajuluchuku. The book went beyond the bit and snippet allowed in the earlier publication by accommodating the full transcripts of the two-day meeting.

Not much was made of it by the media until it went out of print. Partly for this reason and because of the limited number in circulation, the transcripts never entered recurrent discussions of the Nigerian civil war. The good thing is that, if only for the benefit of those who missed it before, the book has been reprinted. It was among twelve other books by Obafemi Awolowo re-launched by the African Press Ltd of Ibadan at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, in March 2007. Important to note is that among other speeches made by Awolowo, before, during and after, on the Nigerian Civil War, the transcripts are intact. They reveal who said what between Chief Obafemi Awolowo, his Excellency Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu, Sir Francis Ibiam, Chiefs Jereton Mariere, C.C. Mojekwu, JIG Onyia, Professors Eni Njoku, Samuel Aluko and Dr. Anezi Okoro, who attended the meeting. Unlike the Ifeajuna Manuscript, still in limbo, the transcripts are in respectable print and may be treated as public property or at least addressed as a feature of the public space.

I regard both documents as the most forgotten documents of the civil war, because they have hardly been mentioned in public discourses in ways that recognize the gravity of their actual contents. Or better to say, they have been mentioned, only in passing, in articles written for major Nigerian newspapers and magazines since the 70s, or parried on television, but only in figurative understatements by people who, for being able to do so, have appeared highly privileged. The privilege, grounded in the fact that they remained unpublished, may have been partially debunked by the publications I have mentioned, but their impact on the discussions have not gone beyond the hyped references to them, and the innuendos and insinuations arising from secessionist propaganda during the civil war.

The core of the propaganda, which reverberated at the Christopher Okigbo International Conference at Harvard University in September, 2007, is that Awolowo promised that if the Igbos were allowed, by acts of commission or omission, to secede, he would take the Western Region out of Nigeria. In a sort of Goebellian stunt, many ex-Biafrans including high flying academics, intellectuals and publicists who should know better, write about it as if they do not know that the shooting war ended in 1970. What Awolowo is supposed to have discussed with Ojukwu before the shooting war has been turned into an issue for post-war propaganda even more unrestrained than in the days of the shooting war. The propaganda of the war has been dutifully regurgitated by a Minister of the Federal Republic, Mrs Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, twice on loan to the Federal Government of Nigerian from the World Bank, in the book, *Achebe: Teacher of Light* (Africa World Press, Inc, 2003), co-authored with Tijan M. Sallah. They write: “The Igbos had made the secessionist move with the promise from Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the Southwest that the Yoruba would follow suit. The plan was if the southeast and southwest broke away from the Nigerian federal union, the federal government would not be able to fight a war on two fronts. Awolowo, however, failed to honour his pledge, and the secession proved a nightmare for the Igbos. Awolowo in fact became the Minister of finance of the federal government during the civil war.” (p. 90).

Forty years after the civil war, you would expect that some formal, academic decorum would be brought into play to sift mere folklore and propaganda from genuine history. But not so for those who do not
care about the consequences of the falsehoods that they trade. They continue to pump myths that treat their own people as cannon fodder in their elite search for visibility, meal tickets and upward mobility in the Nigerian spoils system.

Rather than lower the frenzy of war-time 'huge lies' that were crafted for the purpose of shoring up combat morale, they increase the tempo. I mean: post-war reconstruction should normally forge the necessity for returnees from the war to accede to normal life, rather than lose their everyday good sense in contemplation of events that never happened or pursuing enemies who were never there. Better, it ought to be expected, for those who must apportion blame and exact responsibility, to work at a dogged sifting of fact from fiction, relieving the innocent of life-threatening charges, in the manner of the Jews who, after the Second World War sought to establish who were responsible for the pogroms before they pressed implacable charges.

Unfortunately, 40 years does not seem to have been enough in the Nigerian case. Those who organized the pogrom are lionized as patriots by champions of the Biafran cause. Those who sought lasting answers away from blind rampage are demonized as villains. The rest of us are all left mired in the ghastly incomprehension that led to the war. Those for whom the civil war was not a lived, but a narrated experience, are made to re-experience it as nightmare, showing how much of an effort of mind needs to be made to strip the past of sheer mush. As it happens, every such effort continues to be waylaid by the sheerness of war propaganda that has been turned into post-war authoritative history. It is often offered by participants in the war who, like Dim Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu himself, will not give up civil war reflexes that ruined millions.

In an interview in Boston on July 9th 2001, Ojukwu told a questioner: “We’ve said this over and over again, so many times, and people don’t understand: they don’t want to actually. If you remember, I released Awolowo from jail. Even that, some people are beginning to contest as well. Awo was in jail in Calabar. Gowon knows and the whole of the federal establishment knows that at no point was Gowon in charge of the East. The East took orders from me. Now, how could Gowon have released Awolowo who was in Calabar? Because the fact that I released him, it created quite a lot of rapport between Awo and myself, and I know that before he went back to Ikenne, I set up a hotline between Ikenne and my bedroom in Enugu. He tried, like an elder statesman to find a solution. Awolowo is a funny one. Don’t forget that the political purpose of the coup, the Ifeajuna coup that began all this, was to hand power over to Awo. We young men respect him a great deal. He was a hero. I thought he was a hero and certainly I received him when I was governor. We talked and he was very vehement when he saw our complaints and he said that if the Igbos were forced out by Nigeria that he would take the Yorubas out also. I don’t know what anybody makes of that statement but it is simple. Whether he did or didn’t, it is too late. There is nothing you can do about it. So, he said this and I must have made some appropriate responses too. But it didn’t quite work out the way that we both thought. Awolowo, evidently, had a constant review of the Yoruba situation and took different path. That’s it. I don’t blame him for it. I have never done”. This was quoted in Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo’s article, reporting the Okigbo International Conference, on page 102 of The GUARDIAN, Monday, October 1, 2007. Quite an interesting one for anyone who wishes to appreciate the folkloric dimensions that mis-led many who listened to Radio Biafra or have followed the post-war attempts to win the war in retrospect instead of preparing the survivors, on both sides of the war, to confront the reality that mauled them and could maul them again unless they shape up.
Against Ojukwu's self-expiatory remarks, it is of interest to read Hilary Njoku, the head of the Biafran army at the start of the war. In his war memoirs, A tragedy without heroes, he declares that the meeting between Obafemi Awolowo and Ojukwu had nothing to do with the decision to announce secession. Njoku writes that: “...most progressive Nigerians, even before him, saw 'Biafra' as a movement, an egalitarian philosophy to put Nigeria in order, a Nigeria where no tribe is considered superior to the others forever......It was the same Biafran spirit which led Chief Awolowo to declare publicly that if the Eastern Region was pushed out of Nigeria, then the Western Region would follow suit. When Ojukwu moved too fast recklessly in his ostrich strategy, the same Chief Awolowo led a delegation of Western and some Midwestern leaders to Enugu on 6th May, 1967 and pleaded with Ojukwu not to secede, reminding him that the Western Region was not militarily ready to follow suit in view of the weaknesses of the Western Command of the Nigerian Army and the dominant position of the Northern troops in the West. Ojukwu turned a deaf ear to this advice maybe because of his wrong concept”.(p.141)

Anyone wishing to, or refusing to, take Ojukwu's word for it may do worse than read what I am calling the forgotten documents. I am of the view that there are immovable grounds for refusing to take Ojukwu's word on faith. Or, may be, faith would be excusable if one has not read the transcripts of the Enugu meeting in addition to the mileage of information provided by many post-civil war narrations since Alexander A. Madiebo's opener, The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War. What seems to be unknown to hagiographers of the civil war is that the meeting about which they have told so much was actually documented. The transcripts of the meeting are no longer secrets. They have been in the open for more three decades, providing a basis for recasting the seduction of the propaganda which pictured the meeting as a secret one with participants being the only ones who could vouch for what was or was not said. Arguably, dependence on sheer memory, living in a folklorist's paradise, may well have enabled all and sundry to feel free to mis-describe what transpired, to build an industry of deliberate falsification, leaving common everyday information to be whispered about as to their earth-shaking impact, as if a loud comment on them would bring the sky down. Indeed, it can be imagined how the old propaganda lines about what happened at the Enugu meeting helped to shore up morale on the secessionist side during the civil war while, on the Federal side, absolute silence or 'rogue' mis-use and abuse of their supposed truth-value, powered official indifference, somersaults and snide reviews, in speech and action. Since there are many on both sides of the civil war who have had rationales for not letting the whole truth survive, it may be seen as quite convenient to have found a man like Awolowo, too much of a thorn in the flesh of many, as a necessary scapegoat. It explains why no proper history of the Nigerian Civil War is to be found which looks with dispassion at the issues and without contrived gaps. Few, without the benefit of the light that the two forgotten documents bring to bear on the issues, have been able to interrogate the purveyors of the falsehoods - the big men who did not know the truth but have had to say something authoritative about it; or those who know it but have had reasons, personal and public, for not vouchsafing it. Besides, there exists a gaggle of revisionists and post-war hackers who do not want the truth to be known because it hurts their pride as inheritors of the falsehoods. They prefer, through a brazen parroting of unfounded folklore, to swindle generations that, as a result, have become unavailable for the building of genuine nation-sense that can accommodate all Nigerians. So over-powering has been their impact that logically impossible and groundless historical scenarios, deserving of contempt by all rational people, are trussed up and served as staple. I believe that given such poor historical accounting, the benign, intelligent, form of amnesia that, after a civil war, helps people to deal with the reality, has been repressed by voluble folklore.
Therefore, let me make a clean breast of it: my one great rationale for wanting to see the documents 'outed' is to help shore up nation-sense among Nigerians by rupturing the culture of falsehoods and silences that have exercised undue hegemony over the issues. I take it as part of a necessary revolt against all the shenanigans of national coyness and the culture of unspoken taboos that have beclouded and ruined national discourse. What primes this revolt is, first and foremost, the thought of what could have happened if the forgotten documents had seen the light of day at the right time. How easy, for instance, would it have been to stamp the January 15, 1966 Coup as being merely an Igbo Coup if it was known that the original five majors who planned and executed it were minded to release Awolowo from Calabar Prison and to make him their leader - as the Ifeajuna Manuscript vouchsafed in the first few weeks of the coup before the testimonies that came after? What factors - ethnic frigidity, ideological insipidity or plain sloppy dithering could it have been that frustrated the coup-maker's idealistic exercise since they were not even pushing for direct seizure of power? I concede that knowing this may not have completely erased the ethnic and regionalist motivations and overlays grafted by later events. But it could have slowed down the wild harmattan fire of dissension that soon engulfed the initial salutary reception of the coup. Were the truth known early enough, it could have obviated many of the sad and untoward insinuations, and the grisly events to which they led, before during and since the civil war. At the worst, it could have changed, if not the course of Nigeria's history, at least, the manner of assessing that history and therefore the tendency for much civic behaviour to derive from mere myths and fictional engagements.

To say this, I admit, is to make a very big claim! It suggests that the problems of nation-building in Nigeria would have been either solved, ameliorated or their nature changed rather dramatically if these documents had come alive when they were most needed. This claim curry's sensation. It casts me, who can make it, in rather unfanciful light in the sense of putting an onerous responsibility on me to explain how come the manuscripts were not made public when they should have had the implied impact. And what role I have played in their seeing or not seeing the light of day! This was actually what was demanded by a writer in The Sun newspapers in 2007 who argued that only I had claimed in public to know about the existence of the Ifeajuna manuscript and only President Olusegun Obasanjo by quoting generously from it in his book, Nzeogwu, had proved that he, among the well-placed, knew about and could rely on the document. The writer had threatened that if President Obasanjo would not release the documents, I owed a responsibility to do so.

I wish to be upfront with it: that what has been known about the documents in Nigeria's public space largely surfaced as a result of decisions I had taken at one time or the other. As Bari Salau points out in his own preface to Awo on the Nigerian civil war, I was active in turning the Enugu transcripts into public property. I should add that I was later responsible for the outings that the Ifeajuna Manuscript had, whether in Obasanjo's book or in newspaper wrangles in the past two decades. Almost ritually, I drew attention to the forgotten documents in my newspaper columns as Chairman of the Editorial Board of the now defunct Tempo magazine and in interviews granted to other print media and television houses. During the struggle over the annulment of the June 12 1993 elections, I placed enormous weight on the evidence of the manuscripts in attempting to correct some of what I regarded as the fictions of Nigeria's history. All the while, I found myself in a quandary however because I based my arguments on documents that were not public property. They were like mystery documents that I seemed to be pulling out of my fez cap to mesmerize those who were not as privileged as I was. All the effort I had made did not appear sufficient or proficient enough to relieve me of the obligation to complete the
circle of their full conversion into public property. It has been quite bothersome to see that the issues they contain remain ever heated and on the boil. They are issues that have stood in the way of due and necessary cooperation between Nigerians from different parts of the country. I happen to know that in some quarters, merely to mention knowledge of the existence of the documents is viewed as raking and scratching the wounds of the civil war. It is a preference, it seems, for the murky half-truths and outrightly contrived lies, much of them horrid residues of war propaganda, that have mauled our public space and ruined civic projects so irremediably since the war. Yet so insistent are the issues, so inexorable in everyday political discussions, so decisive in the sentiments expressed across regional and ethnic lines, that to continue to let them fester in limbo is to be guilty of something close to intellectual treason.

To meet the challenge of the propaganda, it has become necessary, in my view, to provide a natural history of the documents, first, as a performance in genealogies, to audit the processes through which the documents passed in order to arrive at where they are. I consider this important so that those who may wish to dispute their veracity can do so with fuller knowledge of their odyssey. I am minded to distinguish between offending the sensitivities of those who shore up the myth of we never make mistakes, and others who simply wish for bygones to be bygones. As against bygoners, I think a country is unfortunate and ill-served when it carries a pernicious history on her back that has been garnished by rumour peddlers and fiction-mongers who may or may not derive any benefits from traducing the truth but have been too committed to a line that makes looking the truth in the face unappealing. To keep silent, or to shelve a corrective, in the face of such traducers, is almost churlish. It is certainly not enough to break the silence by outing the forgotten documents. The way to begin to discharge the responsibility is to narrate how I came to know about and have followed the career of the two documents.

To begin with, it was in Ruth First's book, Barrel of a Gun, that I first encountered hints about the existence of the Ifeajuna Manuscript. Ruth First was one of the most daring of the instant historians who took on the writing of post-independence Africa as the continent began to be mauled by those whom Ali Mazrui would describe as the militariat and who operated on an ethic that Wole Soyinka has described as the divine right of the gun. She, who was so determined to uncover the roots of the violence that was overtaking African politics, was fated to die later through a parcel bomb sent by dirty jobbers of her native Apartheid South Africa. Her narrative took on the insidious goings on behind the scenes in several coups across Africa at a time when the issues, participants and sites were still hazy. It was like looking ahead to a future that a free South Africa needed to avoid. In a way, it prepared me to pay attention to the footnote to line 16 of JP Clark's poem, 'Return Home' in his collection, Casualties, published in 1970. In the footnote, JP wrote: “A number of papers. Major Ifeajuna left with me on the night of our arrival at Ikeja the manuscript of his account of the coup, which after due editing was rejected by the publishers as early as May 1966 because it was a nut without the kernel”. This footnote made him post-facto accessory to the coup as he could have been charged by one later-day military dictator down the road. But how did the manuscripts get to be handed over to JP? Which publishers rejected the manuscript? This was left to the grind of the rumour mill for decades. Nothing more authoritative on what happened came from JP Clark until twenty years later when in his Nigerian National Order of Merit Award lecture of December 5, 2001, serialized in the Guardian between 10th and 14th December 2001, he filled in a few more gaps. He said: “My main encounter with the military, however, was played off stage many years before that. In Casualties, my account in poetry of the Nigerian Civil War, so much
misunderstood by my Ibo readers and their friends in quotes, I said at the time that I came so close to the events of 15 January 1966 that I was taken in for interrogation. Shinkafi was the officer, all professional, but very polite. Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna had given me his account of the coup to edit and arrange publication. The authorities thought I had it then in my custody”. JP does not quite say how the authorities knew. Or show that they knew where he kept it.

My first inkling of what happened, regarding the Ifeajuna Manuscript, came to me as a result of a quirk in my biography that made me write a poem, The Poet Lied, which pitched me into the maw of an unwitting controversy on the wrong side of JP Clark. The Poet Lied, was part-response to the Nigerian crisis and civil war dealing with a segment of the political class, all those, including writers, politicians, religious leaders and soldiers - who were in a position to change the images and symbols by which we interpreted our lives but who flunked their roles during the civil war. JP Clark was riled by the poetic imputations, convinced that, as the poet agrees but not the poem, he was the one, or among the ones, satirized. He importuned my publishers, also his own publishers, Longman UK, to withdraw the collection from the market. Or face dire consequences! It was in the course of negotiating with the publishers, between the UK office and the Nigerian branch, how not to withdraw the manuscript from the market that I ran into stories of how one manuscript proffered by JP Clark had brought so much trouble to them two decades earlier. From bits and snippets in informal conversations, here and there, I got to know more about the Ifeajuna Manuscript which JP Clark sent to them to publish. As I gathered, the Longman office in Nigeria had sent the manuscript to Longman UK where it was seen as being too hot to handle. The multi-national, doing good business in Nigeria, did not want to antagonize a military dictatorship that had just come to power. The UK office therefore sent the manuscript to the Nigerian High commission office in London to find out if the manuscript would pass something of a civility test. The new High Commissioner to Britain happened to be Brigadier Ogundipe who had only just survived the counter coup of July 29, 1966 and had escaped to London. He was easily the most senior officer in the Nigerian Army and should rightly have become Head of State if it depended on seniority. Having just avoided untoward consequences for being so prominent, was he in a position to accede to the request? Brigadier Ogundipe simply caused the manuscript to be sent home to the authorities in Lagos. Zealously, the authorities marched on the Longman office in Ikeja and arrested the executives who had sent the manuscripts to the UK for publication. JP Clark, who brought the manuscript, could not be reached. Or so the Longman executives reported. But the military authorities knew what to do. As JP Clark would have it in his lecture: “An interesting development from my visit to the then Special Branch of the Nigeria Police Force at Force Headquarters was that my late friend, Aminu Abdulahi, fresh from assignments in London and Nairobi, moved in from his cousin, M.D. Yusufu, to live with me for a year and keep an eye on me. I have never discussed the matter with our inimitable master spy-catcher of those days. Some years later, he gave me the good advice that the state does not mind what a writer scribbles about it as long as he does not go on to put his words into action.

As for the manuscript: “I have often wondered over the years what became of this manuscript that I kept at one time in a baby's cot. When the publisher Longman chickened out of the project, I handed it over to a brother-in-law of Ifeajuna's to take home to his wife, Rose. I found portions of it later reproduced in General Olusegun Obasanjo's biography of Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu”

JP rounds out his narrative thus: “My purpose of letting you into all this is to help fill in a few details left out in the history of military intervention in Nigeria. Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna is made the villain, while Major Chukuma Nzeogwu is the hero. The portraits are not that black and white and far apart. They
both killed their superior officers and a number of key political leaders in the country in a common cause. So where lies the difference? Where the distinction? I have always found it difficult to understand why one is made out a villain and the other a hero”.

“After the events of the momentous day broke upon us all, and Major Ifeajuna was reported to have fled to Ghana, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi wanted to have him back as he had Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, Chris Okigbo was given the letter to take to President Kwame Nkrumah. But he needed company, someone who shared influential literary friends with him in Accra, but more importantly, someone who could add his voice to persuade Ifeajuna to come home and assume responsibility for his action. We knew the dangers of our assignment. 'JP, I cant bear a pin prickle', Chris had laughed. Yet, when war came, he was to take up arms and die for a new cause. Chris had in fact driven Emman, disguised as a girl, from Ibadan to the then Dahomey border, after he found his way back from Enugu a defeated man”.

JP Clark does not say that he was in that party but readers of Soyinka’s memoirs YOU MUST SET FORTH AT DAWN, would find on page 286-287 of the Nigerian edition, the following: “JP, I always suspected, did have a first-hand knowledge, albeit vague, of the very first coup de’tat of 1966. With Christopher Okigbo, he had accompanied one of the principals Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna across the border, the latter in female disguise. JP turned back at the border while Christopher crossed over to the Republic of Benin (then Dahomey) taking charge of Ifeajuna who was by then virtually an emotional wreck, haunted Christopher related by images of bloodstreams cascading from his dying victims, his superior officers, none of whom was a stranger to him”. Soyinka adds: “JP brought back with him the manuscript of Ifeajuna's account of the coup, hurriedly put together during this period of hiding by that young major and former athlete he was one of the four who set a joint 6'6 record in high jump at the Commonwealth Games in Vancouver, 1956. Knowledge of the existence of the manuscript set off a wild hunt by Gowon's Military Intelligence, desperate for an authentic, first-hand account of those who had plotted the '66 coup, who had done the killings, what civilians, especially politicians, had prior knowledge or had collaborated in the putsch. For a while JP Clark was deemed a security risk. So were his publishers, Longmans, whose editors at one time or the other held the explosive manuscript in their possession, debating the wisdom of releasing its contents into the market”.

JP's account in his National Merit Award lecture unpacks the mystery further. He writes: “We took two trips to Accra by air, the first was a full meeting with Ifeajuna, the second to give his host government time to arrange for evacuation, while he wrote up the defence he would have given at his court-martial in Lagos. We just made it back before Ghana, too, fell to the military. I still wonder what effect the example of Nigeria had upon them. Nkrumah for all his revolutionary fervour, did not know what to do with Major Ifeajuna. He, therefore sent him to his army for debriefing, and they advised the president against giving him the airplane he asked for to return to Lagos to finish his operation.

JP continues: “The man could not understand what had happened in Nigeria, Ifeajuna, told us. So he packed off his unexpected guest to Winneba to be with his compatriots, SG. Ikoku and Dr. Bankole Akpata. With both these ideologues, our stay with Ifeajuna became one running seminar. What became clear was that it was not the Nigerian Army that seized power on January 15, 1966. It was a faction of it, racing against another to secure power for the political alliance of their choice. This group was for UPGA. It beat the other one to the gun, the faction in full support of the governing NNA alliance. That Ifeajuna said, explained the pattern of targets and killings”.

JP Clark said he had asked Ifeajuna at Accra: “Did the General know about your plan?”
“Well, not really, I was just a Brigade Major, and you don't always get that close to a General. But I remember on some of those briefings on the situation in the West, when I said it couldn't go on forever like that, he growled that we junior officers should not go and start anything foolish”.

“And the President away on his Caribbean cruise”

“But you know the politicians were all wooing the army” he said, “Our plan was to bring Chief Awolowo out of jail in Calabar to head our government and break up the country into more states to make for a true federation”.

I have taken the pains to be over-generous with these quotes because they provide an interesting preface to Chinua Achebe’s take on it. As narrated by Ezenwa Ohaeto, Achebe’s biographer, the Ifeajuna manuscript was one of those which came to Citadel Press, the wartime outfit that Christopher Okigbo suggested that they set up. Achebe had said: “...well, you set it up, you know about it, and I'll join. He said, You'll be chairman and I'll be Managing Director, so the Citadel Press was formed. The name came from the idea of the fortress you flee from a foreign land, in danger, and return home to your citadel”.

Christopher Okigbo avidly solicited manuscripts for the publishing house. As Ohaeto writes: “Okigbo also brought another manuscript to Citadel Press which was from Emmanuel Ifeajuna, one of the plotters of the 15 January 1966 coup. The manuscript was Ifeajuna's story of the coup and he gave it to Okigbo who enthusiastically passed it on to Achebe after reading it. It was a work that Achebe considered important so he also read it immediately. But he discovered that there were flaws in the story. He criticized it for two reasons: It seemed to me to be self-serving. Emmanuel was attempting a story in which he was a centre and everybody else was marginal. So he was the star of the thing. I did not know what they did or did not but reading his account in the manuscript, I thought that the author was painting himself as a hero”.

“The other reason was quite serious, as Achebe explains: ‘... within the story itself there were contradictions’. Achebe told Okigbo that it was not a reliable and honest account of what happened. As an example, he cited Ifeajuna's description of the coup plotters at their first meeting in a man's chalet in a catering guest house. The plotters are coming into the chalet late in the night and Ifeajuna describes the room as being in darkness since they are keen not to arouse suspicion. They all assemble and Ifeajuna claims that he stood up and addressed them while watching their faces and noting their reactions. Since it is supposed to be dark, Achebe regarded that description as dubious. Okigbo laughed and remarked that Ifeajuna was probably being lyrical. Some days after that conversation, Okigbo came to Achebe and told him that Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu had asked him: ‘I hear you and Achebe are going to publish Emma's lies?’. That comment by Nzeogwu, a principal actor in the January coup, confirmed that the manuscript was unreliable.'

Times were to turn disastrous for many of those actors before the end of 1967. In later years, Achebe reflected that he might have made a different decision if he had known what lay ahead for Ifeajuna, Okigbo and Nzeogwu. He added, however, that even if the manuscript had been accepted by Citadel Press, it would not have been published, because the publishing house was destroyed at the same time as these three men when the war moved closer”.


There are reasons to believe that the Citadel encounter was not the first in which Chinua Achebe was rejecting the document. The relationship between Christopher Okigbo and Chinua Achebe was at all times during this period so close that it is not conceivable that Okigbo could have failed to brief him about the dynamite that JP brought from Ifeajuna. Besides, as Editorial Adviser to Heinemann, Achebe was sufficiently close to the publishing mill and the burgeoning literati not to have heard about the manuscript. Arguably, it is unlikely that Chinua Achebe was seeing the manuscript for the first time in Biafra. He was too much in the same circles with Okigbo in his many schemes and with JP Clark at the University of Lagos, not to have been aware of the document that Okigbo and JP Clark brought with Ifeajuna from Accra. However, whenever it was that Chinua Achebe saw the manuscript, the issue is whether his editorial judgment had anything to do with the document not seeing the light of day.

What is known of it from his biographer's narration does not make Achebe culpable. Achebe's position on the manuscript could still be faulted however on the grounds that even an unreliable story told by a major actor in an event of such earth-shaking proportions in the history of a young nation-state, deserved to be known. How many stories of the civil war today are without the self-serving disposition of their narrators? Talking about unreliability, Chinua Achebe may have been reading the manuscript from what he knew of Ifeajuna's famed capacity for not standing, in his college days, by what he had done, as even JP, his finest defender has narrated. Or, perhaps, there were things those great writers did not tell themselves even in their closeness. For instance JP. Clark is reported by Ohaeto to have exclaimed after reading the advance copy of Achebe's A man of the people: 'Chinua, I know you are a prophet. Everything in this book has happened except a military coup'. There is no way of knowing, until their memoirs, whether either of them was aware of the rumour, soon entrenched by later events, that Nnamdi Azikiwe had been sounded out by Igbo officers, Ojukwu specifically, on carrying out a coup during the 1964 election crisis. Azikiwe had refused. That rumour is in the same class as the other one: that, tipped off by Ifeajuna before the January 15, 1966 coup, Zik went on a health cruise in the Caribbean under the auspices of Haiti's Papa Doc, an old schoolmate. All the same, if Chinua Achebe did not know about the rumour, he certainly was well placed enough to have known that Nnamdi Azikiwe had refused to call on Balewa to form a government in 1964 because the election was rigged. Azikiwe had written a long speech, published in an early edition of his newspaper, the West African Pilot, explaining why he would not call on the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa, to form a government. And then another emergency edition was published later in the day in which he wrote another speech calling on the Prime Minister to form a government. The Great Zik had virtually been put under house arrest by the British Commander of the Nigerian Army, Welby Everard. Discovering that the army would not obey their commander in chief, Zik capitulated. His capitulation was facilitated by the whispering campaign that it was only two medical opinions that were required to prove him unfit to take a decision. As Dudley footnoted in his Introduction to Nigerian Politics, "The President gave way when he realized there was a move to declare him medically incapable of continuing in office". (p.312) As I have argued in newspaper articles, this was the very first coup in Nigeria's post-independence history. It was the Rubicon crossed after which every Nigerian political party had to build and flex a military muzzle in anticipation of a long expected blow up.

This is the point in the narrative where questions are usually raised about the Awolowo factor: whether he was privy to what the coup makers planned to do with him. Easily dismissed but not scorched is that the soldiers had good reasons for wanting Awolowo above all other living politicians in the country at that time. There was a FREE AWO movement into which even political opponents had plugged for
relevance. Since Awolowo began to suffer the series of house arrests and detentions, before the eventual jail term was confirmed by the Supreme Court, his voice, which consistently defended the poor and the underprivileged had been missing in national affairs. Younger radicals remembered Awolowo’s opposition to the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact, his consistent defence of the rule of law, his unflagging pursuit of social welfare policies against the economics of waste which characterized the capitalist road that Nigeria was taking, and the general slowness in responding to the struggle in the rest of Africa to eliminate colonialism and set Africa free. The Hansards of the Federal House of representatives in Lagos reveal the valiant efforts that Awolowo had made to change the street-beggar economy that Nigeria ran, his opposition to undiluted private enterprise, and his general resistance to the various attempts, to sell a newspaper gag law, a preventive detention act, and the general defederalization of the country. Anyone knowing these would not be surprised that the younger radicals in the country were on Awolowo’s side. Awolowo himself had brought in many young radical elements like SG Ikoku, Bola Ige, Samuel Aluko, Oluwasanmi, Bankole Akpata and others to his side who were generally viewed as socialists involved in creating a better future for the country. This is what Ojukwu means when he says that Awolowo was a hero. The circle of young radicals were enthused by the presence of Segun Awolowo, just returned from law studies in Britain, who was fresh air in the circles in which Awolowo was seen as a brand to be emulated. Segun’s death in a motor accident during his trials won his father the sympathy of this younger generation. The most well known poets in Nigeria, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and JP Clark wrote poems at that time that have served as witnesses to travails of the man and his times. The poets belonged to a small circle of radical intellectuals in the country who knew one another in the University College Ibadan (UCI) and shared a common, energized, notion of a country that would move the world. In spite of the ethnic fractionalization that was a permanent feature of life in Nigeria’s public space, the young Turks of the period were parleying across occupational and ethnic lines. It is not clear how much they shared in a political sense. The question may be asked: how many of them were notionally privy to the idea of a coup – the one supposedly being planned by Awolowo or, later, the one that was supposed to be in the offing after Ojukwu sounded out Nnamdi Azikiwe about one during the election crisis in 1964?

What may be argued with some certainty is that many of them could see that there was a plot to expose and destroy the Action Group, the ruling party in the Western Region. The plot had begun with the declaration of a state of emergency in the Region, the setting up of the Coker Commision of Enquiry to prove corruption in the management of AG’s company, the NIPC, so that the Federal government could seize the assets of the company; and then the institution of a treasonable felony trial to settle the question of the party’s survival once and for all. Later, the plot covered the establishment of the Banjo Commission to prove the failure of free education, Awolowo’s most sensational contribution to development in the country and the star performance that made his party so impregnable in the West. In spite of, or because of, the underhand methods that were being used to drown out Awolowo, anyone who cared to look could tell that he was more sinned against than sinning. In particular, regarding the 1962 treasonable felony trial, involving him and 27 others, any objective observer could have seen that what Awolowo had done apart from organizing a political party was being a thorn in the flesh of the independence government. In the face of the evident plans to destroy his party so that the coalition partners could chop up its remains, he had vowed that he and his party would make the West ungovernable rather than let the region be taken outside the electoral process. His party began to train people to make sure that no undemocratic victories would befall the region. The party sent apparatchiks to Ghana to train. So the accusation during the treasonable felony trial, that they were sending guerillas
for training in Ghana was correct in so far as it was not stretched to imply that it was pursuant to carrying out a coup against the government of the Federation. What is generally ignored by the narrators of this segment of Nigeria’s story, in spite of the admission of its truth by critical participants, is that every Nigerian political party at that time was training toughs for armed struggle. It may be a secret to those who never bothered to look at what was happening outside the newspapers. This is backhandedly confirmed by Tanko Yakasai in his recent autobiography where he retails an added dimension that NEPU pro-insurgents were in league with a Camerounian political party in sending activists for training in Eastern Europe. This should of course be understood against the background of the struggle in the North between NPC’s thugs - ‘Jam’iiyar Mahaukata’, ‘Sons of madmen’- who wore wooden or ‘akushi’ hats, described in Allan Feinstein’s African Revolutionary as having “semi-official sanction to fight against southern dominancy”. They “subsequently extended their terrorism to a group of NEPU adherents’ so that ‘NEPU retaliated with a “Positive Action Wing” (PAW) who wore ‘calabash helmets’ and were determined to resist the NPC’s routine assaults that saw candidates of the opposition jailed or killed, their houses and farms destroyed and, in the case of opposition parties from the south, whole city wide or region-wide riots organized to distance them from power. NEPU went beyond a PAW response to the Mahaukata. The party, as Tanko Yankasai authoritatively reveals, already had experience in the training of guerillas for the Camerounian Sawaba Party(p.209).

In relation to the South, the NPC idea was actually quite fundamentalist because it was primed by the conception of a National Army as a catchment of thugs for realizing partisan ends. The truth of this can now be checked against the testimonies of several NPC stalwarts. They had sent several of their young men into the Nigerian Army to prepare for the day when the military would be needed to settle political scores. Evidently, the parties in coalition at the Federal level were neither true to one another nor to themselves. They saw the destruction of the Action Group differently. They who were busy organizing insurgents against other parties and using even the state apparatus to realize partisan goals needed to hide their activities by accusing the opposition of treason. According to Dudley, the NCNC wished that the Action Group be destroyed so that they, the only member of the coalition that had a foothold in the West, would inherit the West and then confront the North with a Southern solidarity. After Awolowo was jailed in 1962, NCNC strategists actually tried to swallow up the West by forming a coalition with the Akintola faction of the AG which had become the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). They did not reckon with the ingenuity of that doughty fighter, the Are Ona Kankanfo himself. He saw the score quickly. He preferred an alliance with the senior partner in the coalition, the NPC. It was only after failing with the NNDP that the NCNC came back to the AG, this time, in search of a foothold rather than a routing. The Action Group leader, in prison, advised his followers to coast along until it became obvious that the NCNC was more interested in power at the centre and would not like to lose the perks from the coalition in the Federal House. By the time the Western Regional election of 1965 was rigged, the Action Group had formalized an organizational prong that enabled the members, at large, to fulfill the old promise by their leader: rather than for the West to be taken over by undemocratic means, the region would be made ungovernable. This was proficiently achieved with the Wetie riots – dousing opponents with petrol to aid match flare - that gave the sobriquet of the WildWild West to the region.

Of course, at the point of the region-wide riots, it was clear that the two coalition partners, working together for the destruction of the AG would have to re-strategize. Although sharing power at the Federal level, they nevertheless worked against each other everywhere else. The NPC had planned to use its men in the national army for a coup that would clear the nation of the insurgents in the West
and in the Middle Belt, especially in Tivland, where there was an active guerilla war against the government. Meanwhile, by 1964, the UMBC had joined with NEPU to carry out a Northern liberation of sorts before facing the Federal behemoth. They all however joined the United Progressive Grand Alliance, UPGA, whose game, with the NCNC as the core-party, was to go for broke. There seemed to be a consensus across the country, and in every political party, that the crisis could only be resolved through violence. All the political parties were primed for it.

In a country, so wired for armed struggle, there was bound to be very little room for the truth to have dominion. What had to be done through the law courts, as the Action Group would discover, was very much a charade. Awolowo was convicted on the ground that he was so over-weeningly ambitious that although he was not specifically found guilty, his fingerprints could be read on all the events that were to culminate in a coup. The judges, to prove the vaulting nature of the ambitions, took judicial notice of the dreams that Awolowo had recorded in a notebook which he called Flashes of Inspiration. It must be one of the unique court cases in history in which a man was jailed for what he said he saw in a dream rather than what he actually did. Nigeria had simply become a country seeded by and overcome by paranoia, an atmosphere of psychological block, making it difficult to look at opponents with any objectivity. The tendency was to accept every charge as true, the more heinous the better, if directed at someone about whom something good is not supposed to be said. So the charge of treasonable felony was swallowed hook and line without the minimum application of gumption. As it turned out, and as Obasanjo has told the story, Chukwuma Nzeogwu was the intelligence officer who was attached to the efforts to unravel the veracity of the charges in the Coker Commission and Treasonable Felony trial. He was obviously privy to the discovery made by the Coker Commission that Awolowo kept a good account: that he had more money before he became a Premier of western Region than he had in his account after eight years of living in his own house, not in the state house, and spending his own money on entertainment. Even when Kwame Nkrumah visited Nigeria on a state visit, the Ghanaian President stayed in Awolowo's house at Oke Ado in Ibadan. Not in any state house. Thus, there is every reason to assume that Nzeogwu had enough information about the man’s distance from the common run of politicians in the country for Awolowo to be raised above the slough of general discussions and brickbats. What cannot be established is whether the coup makers ever made an attempt to contact Awolowo in jail. From Ifeajuna's account, the coup makers were quite dubious about Awolowo's support. They had therefore decided that if they released him and he failed to be their leader, they would lock him up in the state house and issue decrees in his name. Quite glaring in the so-called master plan is that the coup makers were horridly naïve and permutative. So much so that about the senior officers Ifeajuna writes: “some of our senior officers who were likely to fight on the side of the regime were to be arrested while action took place. We also had to watch the concentration of senior officials. Only those who resisted arrest or fired at troops were to be fired at. When action was completed and a new regime was set up, they were to be released and given appointments, but not necessarily related to what posts they held before the event. We were to present our General with a 'fait accompli'. We were to apologize to him for our actions and request him to join us and take over the plans. If he was not prepared to join us, we would request that he should leave us alone to complete it. And in that case we were to appeal to the officer next in line to come to our help”(70). This sounds like the view of an officer and gentleman who expected the behaviour of others to be determined by his view of human nature rather than by the exigencies on the ground. Ifeajuna as much as lends credence to the charge that Nnamdi Azikiwe was tipped off to go on a health cruise so that he would not be around during the action. He writes: “We were to act before the ex-President returned from his trip to Europe and his
carousing cruise to the Caribbean. This, for two reasons. Firstly, we were certain that he would put up a fight against us. Not that this mattered: but as the head of state he could easily call in foreign troops. In his absence only the Prime Minister could do so. And so the number of persons to invite foreign troops was reduced from two to one. Second reason was that, if he returned, we had to deal with him. But the task of clearing his residence at the state house would require more troops than we could conveniently muster.”

So did he nudge the President to exit while they plotted? He wrote:

“We considered that two VIPs would be of importance to us in controlling the nation. If our General agreed to come with us, then he could rest in charge of the army or he could be head of state. He was acceptable to most officers and men. We would have to appeal to him. We knew that without him it would be difficult to hold the country.

“We also believed that Chief Obafemi Awolowo had become recognized as the rallying point of our nation. If we attempted any set-up without him, we could quite easily end up opposed by the relatively progressive political parties. For him therefore we had the post of executive president or Prime Minister depending on the reaction of our General. But we were also afraid that he could refuse to accept power handed over to him by us. There was the possibility of this highly principled man refusing to come out of jail to assume the highest post in the land. I took care of this. We were to go to him and explain the facts and appeal to him. We planned to bring him into Lagos by air before noon on 15 January. If he refused to leave jail, he was to be ordered to do so. As a prisoner he had no choice. We were to transfer him to the State House and if he still refused, we were to hold him here and inform him that this was his new gaol house! Meanwhile we planned to get the elders of the state to help us get him to agree. If in the end he refused, he was to be held and decrees were to be issued in his name”.

Surely, part of the naivety of the coup makers, or the mis-interpretation of their wishes by their failed coup-leader, is that they hoped to set up a cabinet of civil servants and abolish the Federal system of government. “We had made a selection of fifteen civil servants from all over the country, all of them available on call in the federal civil service. We planned to abolish the federal system of government and get back to the military system. The country was to be broken up into fifteen provinces. In each province there was to be a military governor and a head of administration. The regions were to start winding up themselves by handing over at once minor functions to the new provinces. On the other hand, major functions of the regions were at once to be taken over by the government in Lagos”. That is, in effect, they would get out of prison a man who went to jail for seeking to entrench Federalism and ask him to run a military system, more or less a unitary system. Although the immediate creation of provinces would have mollified Awolowo and many of those who later joined in the revenge coup, there was evident naivety, if not suicidal predisposition in coup makers’ waffling on the question of Federalism or unitarism.

At any rate, according to information vouchsafed after the coup, they had to act to upstage the plans of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) which was to have sent soldiers to the Western Region on January 17, 1966 to deal with the insurgents in the Western Region. When Western Premier Akintola left the NPC leader, Sir Ahmadu Bello on the 14th of January and jetted homewards to Ibadan, he was certain that the deal was fool-proof until the Five Majors of January 15, 1966 struck. Lets grant the benefit of the doubt: that Awolowo would have been released immediately on January 15, 1966 but for those who hijacked the coup from the five majors. Or was it simply taken over from, or handed over by, the five
majors? As the narrative goes, the officer detailed to fly Awolowo to Lagos from Calabar already had his brief. But it never happened. Ojukwu, in effective control of Kano had already scuttled any plan that could take off from what could have become a Kano front. After he was made military Governor of the East, he had urgent matters to attend to which could not have put Awolowo on the agenda. So there is no point disputing his claim that he signed a warrant for the release of the prisoner. It was clearly not agreed that the warrant should be executed. Imaginably, a government that moved quickly to enact a Unitary Decree could not have been in a hurry to release a sworn Federalist from jail. The question is: if Ojukwu signed the warrant, how did the effectuation of the warrant wait for so long until it coincided with the order given by Lt.Col Yakubu Gowon at the head of the revenge coup, for Awolowo to be released? This is an important question because Awolowo was not released until seven months after the first coup of the year. The historic task fell upon the revenge coup makers who had toppled General Aguiyi Ironsi after a rigorously organized pogrom against the Igbo, with a number of other Southerners added to the kill. It was certainly to gain a wider base than their Northern security ambitions allowed that the release of Awolowo from Calabar Prison was announced. It leaves a sneaking feeling that Ojukwu’s powers over the Eastern Region, to which all Igbo in the Nigerian diaspora had to return in search of a safe haven, had not yet become so all-pervasive as to be able to countermand a swiftly executed decision by Federal authorities intent on releasing Awolowo from jail. Nor would it have been politic for Ojukwu, even if he had the power, to attempt to prevent Awolowo from being released after a Federal order to that effect. It would have amounted to holding Awolowo hostage. Could it be said then that in order not to fall into the role of hostage taker, Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, as Military Governor of the Eastern Region carried out an order initiated by a Federal Military Government that he had so flagrantly repudiated? Whatever is the case, it was the release that enabled Awolowo to participate in the discussions to resolve the crisis through sundry Leaders of Thought Meetings up till Awolowo’s peace-hunt to Enugu before the first shot in the Civil war was fired.

It may well be added that it was Awolowo’s participation in Gowon’s administration that enabled him to get a copy of the Ifeajuna manuscript. A copy was sent to him by a well-wisher who thought he should know about the plans that the January 15 1966 coup makers had had in store for him. It was in similar fashion that he got a copy of the transcripts of the Enugu meeting after the tapes were said to have been captured at the fall of Enugu and the take over of the Eastern Nigerian Broadcasting service by Federal Forces. Awolowo had the two documents in safe keeping when I became his Private (Political) Secretary in June 1978. They were among the many papers, not part of the main body of his library, which he had to bring out for my education to help my work as his “involved and committed researcher”, as he requested for in his newspaper advert for the job. I read the documents as part of many such efforts to induct me into the job. I was authorized to make copies for a number of party officials and stalwarts as a means of education in preparation for the battles that the newly formed Unity Party of Nigeria was expected to face in the Second Republic. So let me put it this way: that I read the full text of the Ifeajuna manuscript within three months of my new job. The other document, the transcript of his meeting with Ojukwu, was a typescript that had to be cyclostyled in order for many more copies to be made in preparation for the controversies that we expected to confront in the course of the 1979 election. Although there were quite a few brickbats during that election, not much came that required the appeal to the documents. But Awolowo always wanted to have the documents made public. He hadn’t thought of releasing them before the election because he did not want to draw attention to the false charges at the treasonable felony trials. We did not think the period of election was the best period to do so especially one which he thought to be critical for a man of seventy who
may never have another chance. The dubious value of letting the world know that coup-makers had latched upon him as the saviour they were looking for could have had a double-edged impact with a capacity for damage that may not have been easy to control. After the election, however, there was no more need for such caution. That was when Ebenezer Babatope who had always rooted for it as a job for his friend Arthur Nwankwo of Fourth Dimension, publisher of his own Coups and the Barracks Revolt, was authorized to send a copy to the Fourth Dimension for publication. Unfortunately, as Babatope reported it later, Arthur Nwankwo said Ifeajuna's family was not in favour of the publication. Thereafter, little was done to bring the document to public attention. And, that was how the matter died. Except that I, who had been instrumental to having Awolowo bring out the document could not forget what I had read. Whenever I was confronted by a Nigerian argument which required using the materials from the manuscript to clear the ground, I used it. Especially in my rather longish articles for ThèNews magazine during the June 12 Struggle, from 1993 to 1999, I took special notice of the arguments in the manuscripts in my responses to those who deployed old fictions to seek to undermine the geo-ethnic reality at work in the annulment of the election.

Actually, after I stopped being Chief Awolowo's private Secretary, Kole Omotoso who frequently shared what he has called my 'lived-in library' at Seriki Aro in Ikeja while he was writing his book Just Before Dawn, brought the manuscript of Obasanjo's Nzeogwu to my attention. It was a rather flimsy affair which he said he had been given by Professor Jide Osuntokun of the University of Lagos for a pre-publication assessment. I read through it at one sitting and told him it was a disgrace for Obasanjo, a former Head of State, to be offering such a flimsy fare about the best celebrated soldier in the history of coup-making in Nigeria. As the closest friend to Nzeogwu, virtually sharing the same bed with him on the night before the January 15 coup, he was expected to know enough about him to fill a full-length book. If he had nothing to write, I said, he should go after the letters that they once exchanged, the articles written in whatever magazine at school or wherever, and whatever snippets they could get from all the history books about the man. I proposed that he should at least avail himself of the reasons given by Emmanuel Ifeajuna in the manuscript that has been going from hand to hand without finding a publisher. At the mention of Ifeajuna's manuscript, Kole Omotoso insisted that I had to talk to Jide Osuntokun myself. So I followed him to the Staff quarters in the University of Lagos where I told the Professor without too much preamble what I had told Kole. I also told him that I had a copy of the manuscript in safe-keeping, but that I would not give it to him. If Obasanjo was serious about the manuscript, I said, he knew where to find one; that is, if he didn't already have a copy. In the end, although I cannot now tell where he found the copy that he quoted from, and fairly generously in the published text, I am only too glad that he caused all those letters to be published which are today some of the source materials for anyone interested in assessing Nzeogwu's personality and character. Of course, the book, Nzeogwu, landed Obasanjo in a controversy that led to his being openly criticized in public by his former deputy, retired Major General Shehu Musa Yar'adua. The lands he had acquired in some parts of the North were threatened with seizure as a punitive measure for his writing about the soldier whom many Northerners considered a villain.

In a sense, I would say that I have Obasanjo to thank for the confidence I have had in talking about the Ifeajuna manuscript. Obasanjo's use of the manuscript proved it that the copy that I had kept away was not fake. Whether its content was reliable or not, the point is that the soldier who wrote it had put enough of himself, true or false, into it for Nigerians to know what he wished that we know about the coup that he led. What he wished may have been false but it was unthinkable for a country not to want
to know what a man who had done so much to transform its history had to say. It has nothing to do with the sensitivities of his family. In any case, forty years after, all the millions murked up by the January 15 coup that paved the way for all the succeeding military interventions in Nigeria's history, deserve to know what he had to say for himself and his colleagues. Of interest is that in spite of the famed unreliability of Ifeajuna, none of the narratives written about the Nigerian crisis by the principal protagonists Alexander Madiebo, Ademoyega, Ben Ghulie, and Hilary Njoku have differed in any substantial sense apart from turns of phrases, from the core of what Ifeajuna wrote in the white hot heat of the moment that followed the coup. The contentious issue over their choice of Awolowo has been repeated by the participants in the core group that set out to change the government before they were overtaken by Ironsi, and the echelon that surrounded Ojukwu in Kano who would not allow Nzeogwu to make use of troops in that city to march on Lagos as he had planned to do after he discovered that the coup was botched in the South. It is a matter for historical counterfactuals what the history of Nigeria would have been like if Nzeogwu had not capitulated but had mustered enough will and force to organize a Northern Army that would march upon Lagos from Kaduna. His collapse into the maw of the ethnic mush that had overtaken the coup was the Nigerian equivalent of the seppuku which he was obliged to commit if he were a Samurai in the Japanese army. What happened to the coup makers thereafter including the fact that those who benefited from the coup were unwilling to put them on trial is part of the story that must also have made it difficult to publish Ifeajuna's manuscript.

For that matter, what Nzeogwu called “Emman's lies” did not have to be true to see the light of day. There was a good enough reason to know that although Ifeajuna was Igbo-speaking and many said he was close enough to Azikiwe to tip him off about the impending coup, he took a scathing swipe at the former President of Nigeria in a manner that was itself some “history” worthy of the record. Nzeogwu's opinion of Ifeajuna's incompetence in carrying out the coup is undubitably right on the mark. But it does not invalidate what Ifeajuna had to say. In fact, from hindsight, it can be claimed that what Nzeogwu said on coup day about their intentions was largely corroborated by Ifeajuna's manuscript. That it should have taken so long for it to make its debut between covers is to say the least a national tragedy. The tragedy, it must be said, was egged by the fact that those who hijacked the coup from the five majors did not want the story out because they obviously did not want to identify with the views expressed in it. For the more ethnically inclined ones, the very idea that true sons of the Igbo carried out a coup and wanted to hand it over to Awolowo, a man they regarded as an enemy of their ethnic group, was simply the height of the absurd. To the makers of the July 29 Revenge coup, it would have scuttled their much haggled presumption that it was an Igbo coup. Either way, the manuscript had not a chance.

The other forgotten document of the civil had a better chance but its absence from circulation for a long time, was no less a tragedy. It was supposedly captured among other tapes of the Biafran Broadcasting Corporation when Enugu fell to Federal troops. The tapes were transcribed with glee, according to Awolowo, by those who thought it would finally nail him for the agreement he reached with Ojukwu to have the Western Region secede with the East as Radio Biafra never stopped insisting. As it turned out no such thing, is to be found in the tapes. Rather Awolowo was making a passionate plea for the continuance of Nigeria as a single political entity. He repeated some of his bitterest criticisms of the North and Northern leaders but he believed that it was possible to manage the differences between Nigerians if ethnic groups and regions enjoyed more autonomy. This was simply a parrot cry of his which, as those familiar with his campaigns and his books, especially *Thoughts on Nigerian Constitution and The People's Republic*, would know, required a common welfare policy in education, health, and
employment, to unite all the ethnic groups. He was too old he said to abandon all the dreams he had had for his country. Nor would he like to come to the East with a passport. His solution, which obviously did not get down well with Ojukwu was for Ojukwu to agree for the Eastern Region to come to a national conference and to support the creation of states as a basis for a Federal system free of the hegemony that the North had over the rest of the country; and all the regions in the country had over the minorities. If Ojukwu agreed, he believed, he had enough influence with the minorities of the Middle Belt and in the South to urge a shared positioning with the East and the West for a common stand in opposition to hegemonists in the North who would not want states created. It turned out that Ojukwu did not want states to be created. That was the sticking point.

It must have seemed to the Easterners who had been so overdosed by myths about Awolowo's hatred of the East that he was merely trying out the old animosities in the garb of a pacifier trying to win, by other means, the battles he had always pursued in Nigerian politics. The bottomline is that Ojukwu and Awolowo did not reach an agreement. Their positions in spite of the parliamentary language in which they were couched were fundamentally at variance. Not to forget: it used to be taken as apocryphal by all, except core Awoists, that Ojukwu actually came to see him in the guest house on the last night after the day's plenary. He wanted a one on one with Awolowo. Understandably, Awolowo refused a one on one. Soyinka has now retailed in his autobiography, YOU MUST SET FORTH AT DAWN,(131-132) what Awolowo told him:

“The 1967 eve of secession delegation of national public figures authorized by Yakubu Gowon, to dialogue with Eastern leadership had been led by Obafemi Awolowo, and the formal, well-publicised meeting between the two sides lasted nearly all day. The Easterners listed their grievances and demands, spoke with all apparent seriousness, and saw their guests off to their chalets. Late that same night however, Awolowo was disturbed by a knock on the door. It was the Eastern leader, Ojukwu, himself. He admitted that he had waited till late into the night so as to be able to speak to Awolowo in strictest privacy. Sure, said Awolowo, but he also insisted that at least one or two persons join him. That was agreed, and Awolowo called up the adjoining chalet, woke up the Police commissioner for the Western Region, Olufunwa, and a close political aide.

Accompanying Ojukwu was a small team that included a Professor of History from the University of Ibadan who had fled, like other Easterners, to their beleaguered state. Years afterwards, during the struggle against the Abacha dictatorship, the same don introduced himself to me at a meeting in the United States in 1996, and revealed his participation at the nocturnal meeting of thirty years earlier. His account was a consistent and detailed confirmation of what Awolowo confided in me that afternoon.

Odumegwu Ojukwu’s mission was unambiguous, Awolowo said to me. “The young man had come to inform me that the East had decided on secession, and that there was no going back. All that was left was the announcement of a date. He said, “Sir, I have not come to argue, but to inform you. It has been decided”.
“It was clear that any discussion was futile”, Awolowo continued, “After all, we had done nothing but talk all day. Ojukwu confessed that he had agreed to meet the delegation at all only out of respect for my person. Biafra had already taken a decision”.

“I was not surprised”, the Chief admitted. “I did one thing, though, I made one request of him in fact, I insisted on it. I said to Ojukwu at least, let us in the West - I, specifically - have a minimum of two weeks notice before you announce the decision. And he promised. Yes, he promised me that much”.

I hesitated, but could not resist asking: “Why two weeks? You told him you needed two weeks - to do what?

Awolowo gave one of his enigmatic smiles, “You know Olufunwa, the Police Commissioner?”.

I nodded Yes.

“Well, apart from me, he is the only one who knows the answer to that question. And he’s not likely to tell you either”.

I did not press him.

Hardly had Awolowo’s delegation settled back into Federal territory than Ojukwu declared an Independent State of Biafra. The date was May 30, 1967. A short while after, Chief Awolowo accepted to serve as Commissioner of Finance under Yakubu Gowon.

The Federal Government had however made a pre-emptive move. On May 27, Gowon abolished all four regions and split the nation into twelve new states. This achieved the goal of dangling before the entities that were newly carved out from the East, the attraction of their own autonomous governance, with all the resources of the oil soaked Niger delta. Between the two strokes, loyalties in the former Eastern Region were split. War appeared inevitable”.

Soyinka’s narration does not include the parting shot that Ojukwu gave the next morning as he followed Awolowo to the tarmac to say goodbye. Shaking the Chief with both hands, Ojukwu said in Yoruba “Baba, atilo” ’Old one, we’ve gone’. (as Awolowo reported it to his followers). As he took off from Enugu Airport with his fellow peace hunters, Awolowo knew that Biafra was on the cards. He did not expect Ojukwu to make as immediate an announcement as he did. But it should not have been any surprise. A prospective war leader who reveals a decision of such strategic significance to a prime decision-maker on the enemy side should not be expected to wait a moment longer than necessary to pre-empt a counterforce. It would have been better if Ojukwu had not told Awolowo anything about the plans to announce Biafra. But once he did, he was obliged to break whatever promise he had made. What kind of General would reveal such information to another, a potential antagonist, who had his own calculus of the power equation in the country that he was intent on splitting apart and not be worried about the consequences of a leakage. The short of the matter is that once Ojukwu discussed Biafra with Awolowo, it was, or should have been, clear that any promise he made about giving Awolowo a breathing to organize his own fraction would not be respected.
As such, there is nothing in the forgotten documents to suggest that Ojukwu and Awolowo had reached any decisions about what to do if Ojukwu had waited. What Awolowo could have done can be left to the imagination. Only a very naïve Ojukwu could have accepted an agreement made with Awolowo as viable in the circumstances of the Western Region at that time. Certainly, Ojukwu was not that naïve. He was calculating enough to have known that whatever influence Awolowo had over his Yoruba people was not enough. Ojukwu was Nigerian enough to know that that influence would not have much cut in a situation where a virtual occupation army, as Awolowo actually called it, commanded by a brazenly Northern catchment in the army, was sitting pretty in the Western Region. It was an army only just moving from a secessionist disposition to the format of national unity. What is now well known is that the Yoruba echelon in the Nigerian Army was roundly pro-unity. Among soldiers, on both sides, it was naïve to have expected that the Yoruba officers in the Army or even its civilian leadership would consider going into a coalition with an Igbo-led secessionist move without their having made a genuine contribution to the framing of the project. Were there to be a handshake across the Niger, it would have had to depend not on any one-sided plans but a community of grievances shared. The intelligence that Awolowo himself gathered impressionistically during the Enugu meeting gave him enough reason to believe, as he told his followers thereafter, that the Eastern Region was not prepared for the war it was about to embark upon. Even if he was the most feckless leader in the world, and Awolowo was not known to embark on a project he had not given much thought to, there was hardly a chance that he would agree to go into a war on Ojukwu's side on the basis of a two week mobilization of his people.

Incidentally, Awolowo's hunch was shared on harder evidence by Biafran military leaders led by Hilary Njoku who knew that Biafrans had been stampeded into but not readied for war. In order to appreciate Hilary Njoku's position, many people would need to read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, Half of a Yellow Sun, the love story in a time of war, if only for the atmospherics. It shows how the General gave wooden sticks to his people, as civil defenders, in a shooting war claiming that no force in Black Africa could subdue Biafra. Sheer emotional grandstanding was what the war effort rested upon. But for the shenanigans on the Federal side, the deliberate pussy-footing and sometimes larking in the war front, as a way of setting the stage to settle some scores with the authorities in Lagos, it would have been a much-shorter war.

As readers of Onukaba Adinoyi Ojo's biography of Obasanjo must know, Murtala Muhammed never gave up his grouse: “We told you not to end the war the way you did so as to sort things out, you went gaddam gaddam (Hausa expression for heedless rush) and finished it. Now you have a lion in your hands, a lion that does not roar, bite or claw, absolutely inefficient and ineffective”, Muhammed charged impulsively.

As for the People's General in Biafra, he was carried shoulder high on a wave that he could have resisted and steered in a different direction but preferred to manipulate. At any rate, what Awolowo had offered Ojukwu as a solution to the crisis was absolutely outside the rooting for secession. It was more coherent and more consistent with his already fairly well known position on Federalism and a strategy of welfarism as a solution to the Nigerian crisis. At the meeting, as the published document shows, Awolowo believed that: “What we want in Nigeria is a house to be built which will be big enough to accommodate all of us, without friction, without trouble. Let us have a plan made, let us get an expert contractor to build the house. When the house is completed to our satisfaction let them call it what name they like, what is important is that the house should be big enough to accommodate all of us comfortably, without friction and without trouble. I think we should forget about federation or
confederation. Let us see what the contents are going to be. Once the contents are stated then we will allow political scientists to give it a name they like. The name does not matter to us so long so we are satisfied that this is the sort of thing we need to make us live together as Nigerians.

“I was a little bit disturbed by the point you made before. I hope you have not taken a final decision on it, that is, that the East will not associate with the North in future. Easterners have fought more than any other group in this country over the years to make Nigeria what it is, or what it was, before the crisis began. I think it will be a pity if they just forget something for which they have laboured for years. Many of the Easterners who fought for “One Nigeria” are no longer with us. It will not be a good tribute to their memory by destroying that “one Nigeria”. Certainly, it is not going to be the same as it used to be. I have taken a stand on that, and I am prepared to drop tribal labels at the moment, but I know in my own mind what sort of thing I have in view for the federation. But I think it will be a great pity and tragedy and disservice to the memories of all those who have gone to disband Nigeria. An here we are not here to criticize anybody, I think it is generally agreed that some units have done more for the unity of Nigeria than others. The East certainly have not yielded first place to anyone in that regard. I would like you to consider that aspect very seriously”.

This position taken on Saturday 6th May 1967 was quite in sync with the position he had taken at a meeting of the Leaders of Thought meeting at the Western Hall, Agodi, Ibadan, on Monday 1st of May, 1967. In that speech, his aim was to undermine the position of those Nigerian Leaders of Thought who, as he later explained, were “seriously suggesting that the so-called four component units of the country should go their own separate ways as so many sovereign states”. Specifically, he meant to repudiate the proposition that the Federation would be viable even without the East as was being canvassed by some people who had, in his words, “settled it finally in their minds the sort of Constitution they consider suitable for the whole country, or such part of it as may be left after the East shall have opted out of the Federation”.

At the Agodi meeting, he placed four imperatives before the Western Nigerian Leaders of Thought in particular and the Nation in general. Of the Four Imperatives he said:

“Two of them are categorical imperatives and two are conditional.

ONE: Only a peaceful solution must be found to arrest the present worsening stalemate and restore normalcy.

TWO: The Eastern Region must be encouraged to remain part of the Federation.

THREE: If the Eastern Region is allowed by acts of omission or commission to secede from or opt out of Nigeria, then the Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation.

FOUR: The people of Western Nigeria and Lagos should participate in the AD Hoc Committee or any similar Body only on the basis of absolute equality with the other Regions of the Federation”

It would require a major somersault in logic to make this look like a vote for the secession of any part of Nigeria. Actually as early as August 1966, on his being repreived from his ten year imprisonment, Awolowo had made a speech in which he said: “The breaking up of Nigeria into a number of sovereign states would not only do permanent damage to the reputation of contemporary Nigerian leaders but would also usher in terrible disasters which would bedevil us and many generations to come.” To
contort such a speech in favour of secession belongs to a vaulting refusal to see no reason that is not pro-secession. To insist however that Awolowo encouraged the Igbo to secede actually insults the intelligence of the average Igbo. The implication is that after the pogrom of 1966, it required an Obafemi Awolowo, whether as a goad or quarry to hearten the attempt at secession. It is close to saying that they thought of an alternative that was different but had to bow to Awolowo’s, an old enemy’s, prodding. This may be the picture that many Biafrans liked to have of themselves. Those who think the Igbo deserve a better picture of themselves may be called names. But it does not change the score.

What is interesting in this regard is that well known acts perpetrated by other leaders during the war are actually now being credited to Awolowo by postwar propagandists and are being made to stick beyond lines of collective responsibility while actual performances that he made are smudged out of acknowledgement. For a man who could be said to have done more than any other single individual to have garnered the out-of-the-war-front intelligence to keep Nigeria as one country, it is actually a surprise to see how little Federal cover has been given to Awolowo by Federal agencies and establishments. Generals who were worried that Awolowo might convert his proficiency in the management of the country’s finances and general affairs into political power certainly preffered that the war story be told against him. For ex-Biafrans who believe that Awolowo disabled their war efforts through his many ploys, including the change of the currency, the refusal to devalue the Naira, and the ordering of a stop to food corridors, Awolowo deserves to be sent to the International court even post-humously. The concentration on Awolowo as it turns out is such a fixation that many are prepared to believe that even if Awolowo was still in prison when the pogrom took place, he should be arraigned for it. It is very much unlike the position taken by the Jews who not only went after exposing the perpetrators of the holocaust after the Second World War but took extremely inter-subjective care to ensure that no innocents were punished for crimes that others committed. The reverse, clearly, is the case with the Nigerian crisis and civil war. It is quite interesting in this regard, and perhaps, a mark of Achebe’s forgiving nature that in his The Trouble with Nigeria, he grants the status of arch-nationalist to Mallam Aminu Kano, of whose faction of the People’s Redemption Party, PRP, he became a member, even after knowing of the Mallam’s mobilization of the resistance to feared Igbo domination after the January 15 Coup. Or he did not know it? Allan Feinstein, Mallam’s biographer, had given enough leads to explain the radical leader’s mobilization of the North before the pogrom. On page 225 of The African Revolutionary, the autobiography of Mallam Aminu Kano, he writes that his subject “had to decide what was right for his country and his North ……..Aminu Kano’s smouldering fear of Southern domination had finally culminated in what he considered a genuine and serious threat to the development of his first love, Northern Nigeria”. As it happened, Aminu Kano was arrested in connection with the pogrom in the North but was promptly released for want of evidence. Decades later, as the issues are being memorialized by key actors of that era, the post-coup mobilization has been coming under new lights. As happened, it was Alhaji Ahmed Joda, a top aide to Major Hassan Usman Katsina, Governor of Northern Region, who was sent by “top civil servants” in Kaduna to meet with Alhaji Maitama Sule in Kano to “initiate leadership in getting the people of the North to understand the aims of government” after the January 1966 coup. On pages 211 -212 of the biography, Maitama Sule..Danmasanin Kano by Ayuba T. Abubakar, it is told of how it was Maitama Sule, an NPC stalwart before the coup, who “suggested that Mallam Aminu Kano was the most suitable, because he was widely respected, never held a government leadership appointment and had the people behind him. Again, he was a leading figure in UPGA......So Maitama arranged for Mallam Aminu to meet Alhaji Joda the following day. Thereafter, Mallam Aminu Kano became the leading consultant for the government and top civil
servants and their link with the rest of the North”. In The Story of a Humble Life: An Autobiography, Tanko Yakasai, an Aminu Kano deputy in the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) authenticates the story: “At the beginning, most NEPU members were happy with the military take over. It was only after some few days that they started to think twice about the situation......the way some Igbo traders at Sabongari market in Kano started to treat Northerners”. A meeting was then held in Aminu Kano’s house in Sudawa by old NEPU stalwarts. Aminu Kano “drew the attention of the meeting to the apathy pervading the political scene in the North and urged those present to rise up to the occasion; otherwise it would be difficult to rejuvenate political interest in the people. The meeting then decided that a tour of the Northern Region should be undertaken to make contact with opinion leaders with a view to alerting them of the danger posed by that situation. The tour was to be undertaken under the guise of paying condolence visits to the families and traditional rulers of those killed during the military take-over. ........We started from Sokoto, followed by Bauchi and Maiduguri. Within a few weeks, we covered the whole region”. (page 221). Although accused of having joined the NPC, “we continued with our mobilization campaign”, writes Tanko Yakasai. Of course, there were different contact groups mobilizing, sometimes with cross-cutting memberships. They were all to make what seemed a consensual response to Major General Aguiyi Ironsi’s Unification Decree which according to Tanko Yakasai “created a lot of fear in the minds of the civil servants and traditional rulers.....”. A protest rally organized in Kano against the Unification Decree turned the seething anger into a region-wide prairie fire that grew into the pogrom against the Igbo and those associated with them. As it happened, the pogrom preceded and accompanied the Revenge Coup of July 29 1966.

The matter of interest is that Awolowo was still in prison at Calabar when it all began to happen. But it was after the exodus of the Igbo back to the East and of many southerners from the North; and then, the failure of the various leaders of Thought meetings, including the Aburi meeting in Ghana, to resolve the consequent loss of faith in the idea of a united country, that secession was declared. And war began. In the narration of the crisis and the tragedies of the war, different partisans have chosen what to emphasize between the grisly images of the pogrom and the guitar-ribbed and kwashiorkor ridden children in Biafra and the direct casualties in the war front. Who to blame from the perspective of those who suffered the dire consequences? To ask is to put history in a quandary because in the situation of organized anarchies that preceded the war, it is the botched January 15 Coup that takes the rap. All murderers are bad but it was the unrounded nature of the violence, the lopsided regional accounting, that Nigerians, North and South, will always remember. It turned jubilation into self-questioning angst. The truth is that the years of distrust already on the ground, allowed for an interpretation which was incorrect. Otherwise, it did not start as an Igbo coup. It was turned into one by successive acts of commission and omission which could have been averted by greater exercise of cultural empathy. This was, unwisely knocked aside; not just by the arrogance of power that all military rule insinuates, but the inability of the new rulers at the centre to see Nigeria as a family of different nationalities needing an effort of mind and a lot of civility to turn into a nation of shared conversations. Admittedly, the leaders had their prejudices; but the necessity for shared living called for learning how to let people govern themselves irrespective of how unprepared they appeared to be. Education for leadership needed to have begun from having laws that were not tilted against any part of the polity. Unfortunately, once violence became the definition of the terms of association, it was not going to be easy to retract. As violence led to more violence, whoever on top sought a draconian hold in order not to be sucked into its quicksand and boil. Hence those who began by detesting a unitary system of government ended up creating a unitary hegemony. Trust and a basis for stability became goals to be
achieved through a lopsided cut. The point is that nothing could replace the effort that needs to be made in every society, even one that is uni-cultural rather than multi-ethnic and multi-religious, to let decision-making come from within a community rather than as an imposition. It so happens that the failure of the first coup, as with all succeeding ones in Nigeria’s history came from pursuing the opposite of what they claimed they wanted. By being generally of a lopsided cut, all of them morphed into preparations for a genocide of sorts. Thus, once the pogrom in the North created the basis for a war, or at least some form of return violence, the word genocide had become regionally or ethnically positioned to account what would follow. Specific to the period of civil war: those who used the term genocide tended to do so in the sense of a propaganda pitch to rev the cause or score points in the competition for international alms, arms, and domestic power. Not distinguishing the pogrom in the North from the actual deaths and derangement of life found in the war situations was quite a grand strategy of Biafrans. Truth is, once war was declared, both sides were on a mutual genocidal binge. Put the word to some test and it turns out to have been so much a ploy to attract support for Biafra, as the rebel stronghold shrank from all of Eastern Region to the closed-in Igbo heartland. The weight of Federal might, against the fast diminishing rebel territory, could not evade the sheerness of it: that the pounding of one identifiable set of Nigerians, had the implication of a geno-factor. A war in a multi-ethnic society poses this execrable frame. Only those who love war may try to deodorize it by pretending that it does not yield forms of genocide. On both sides of the Nigerian civil war, the genocidal instincts were quite alert. And knowing that genocides are such bad things, propagandists reached for international support by playing it up or down. This is why talking about the starving children of Biafra as an incidence of genocide turns out not to be such a straightforward matter. Biafra lost much international support, except for the sentimentality of Caritas, when it was discovered, and discussed across the world, that the General of the People’s Army was engaged in unethical profiling of starving children in order to attract international sympathy. In his letter of resignation from his $400,000 contract and his post as Public Relations Representative of Biafra in the United States, Robert S. Goldstein, who had helped to build up much international concern for Biafra wrote to the Biafran Commander in chief as follows: “It is inconceivable to me that you would stop the feeding of thousands of your countrymen (under auspices of world organizations such as the international Red cross, world council of churches and many more) via a land corridor which is the only practical way to bring in food to help at this time........ I cannot serve you any longer. Nor can I be party to suppressing the fact that your starving thousands have the food, medicine and milk available to them....it can and is ready to be delivered through international organizations to you. Only your constant refusal has stopped its delivery.” This piece of archival material may well have been a propaganda coup for the Federal side but, as its publication in Nigeria’s Morning Post showed, it cannot be excluded from the story without missing the real flavor of the times. It therefore be claimed without fear of contradiction that, around the much-trumpeted genocide, was a Biafran proto-state that was prepared to send some well-placed children out of harm’s way to havens in Ivory Coast and elsewhere in the world but was using other people’s children in Biafra as guinea pigs for propaganda purposes. The truth, bitter, as it must sound, is that once war was declared, both sides were on a genocidal binge that no post-war leveraging can undo.

For that matter, the reverse side of the Biafran charge of genocide against the Federal side is that the charge can be firmly and rigorously laid that Biafra sent people into combat who had no weapons to fight in a real war. And there was a vast civilian population whose food needs were not considered an issue either in the initial promotion of war frenzy or in the course of the war. Those who continue to
trip on the propaganda of war, and are probably hoping that they would be given food stamps and
reliefs if they manage to plunge Nigeria into another war with their unthinking fictions, need to be told
that it will not be called a war if one side must feed the other side. As actually happened. That such
considerations were always there, and were seriously entertained, is why many writers call the Nigerian
Civil war a phoney war. Or a brother’s war. The gleeful latching upon Awolowo’s statement that
starvation is a weapon of war as a means of raking up old inter-ethnic animosities or winning a
prosecutor’s slot in a Nuremberg-type trial, wont change this reality. Even the Federal side which
allowed and then stopped food shipment to Biafra knew it was merely trying to fulfill all righteousness.
Who has yet found a way to stop soldiers in any theatre of war from hijacking the food meant for the
civilian populations? Who does not know that soldiers move on their stomachs and are more likely
to hijack food meant for civilians than not? Starkly, the question is always there: whether or how to to
allow a welfare package to the other side without committing suicide. War may thereby be prolonged.
But this is talking about a war between brothers. Sad, it is, that the truly brotherly elements that
caracterized the waging of the war on both sides of the Nigerian civil war have not been allowed to
surface by the spoilsports of the propaganda Ministries who do not allow accounting for the foods and
beer shared across battle lines between the combatants. Not to forget the egregious observance of
eight-hour war-day on the Federal side and the deliberate slowing down of Federal aggression which,
sometimes humanitarian but based on scheming for power in Lagos, lengthened the period of warfare
and may unwittingly have been responsible for the many civilian deaths through hunger.

Talking war as war, when Biafrans made the famous incursion into the Midwest State, were they
thinking of the convenience of Midwesterners? Their strategic exigencies had little place for the
sensibilities of a region that had shown much sympathy for the Biafran cause up to the point of not
allowing the region to be a staging post for launching an attack on Biafra. But Biafrans treated the region
as mere faggot for the fire. It turned out that the military Governor of the state, David Ejoor had been
out-numbered and out-gunned by Igbo-speaking elements in his cabinet who actually out-voted him, six
by three, when the pressure came for Biafrans to be allowed to come in. So we can argue, strictu sensu,
that Biafra did not invade the Midwest. Biafra was invited into the Midwest State. Hence, as many
writers on the war have reported, no shot was fired. The food and other resources, including hard
currency, for whose sake the incursion was made, may have been a good enough bargain for the
incoming army. It ended up however, exposing a lot of untoward factors including ethnic arrogance,
which told the minority ethnic nationalities in the war-torn South what could continue to happen to
them if they remained part of Biafra. To think of it, the easy indifference to the rights of the minority
ethnic nationalities who itched to take their own lives in their own hands was what horridly vitiated the
whole idea of the Biafran enterprise. And it was this that gave the Federal side such moral authority,
egged on, since the Revenge coup, by the release of Adaka Boro and his co-partisans who had been
sentenced to death, awaiting execution, for pushing secession for a Niger Delta Republic. It was this
that kept the creation of new states on the hot burner even without the threat of a Biafran secession to
grant its inexorability. The bottom line is that the evidence of people seeking freedom for themselves
without considering that others also needed it was what provided the moral fuel that routed Biafra,
even as much as Federal guns and the idea of starvation as a weapon of war.

Let’s face it: it rankles. I mean, the long-standing and brazen refusal to recognize that there were others
in the Eastern Region and in the Midwest who also lost a lot of relations in the pogrom, and who
deserved to be treated like the proper nationalities that they were, rather than as pariahs in their own
country! What may well be taken as a factor in this is that it was Awolowo’s fate, from early in his career, to have earned the dislike of so many whose region, including his own, he had continuously slated for splitting into their ethnic fractions in pursuit of his brand of federalism. The creation of states, along ethnic lines, his lifelong pursuit, sought the turning of Nigeria from a mere geographical expression to a cultural expression, a nation, through the establishment of a common access for all and sundry to free education, free health, full employment and pensions and the freedom of the press and judiciary. No question about it: Awolowo was a very ambitious man. He believed in becoming the leader of a great country that could lift Africa up. He felt it would be a belittling of his project if he stood by to allow an energetic and ebullient nationality like the Igbo to excise themselves through the feebleness of those who would send people to death in their millions rather than prepare them for the future with the calculating gumption of true generals. For him, it was sad to hear people talk about how much the masses in Biafra wanted war, as if Generals are not supposed to be specially trained to see beyond anger and bitterness and therefore to be able to appraise situations objectively, and thus to obviate feeble projecteering in the name of war. Do you send your children to commit suicide because you are angry with an enemy? Where went that proverb which says that you do not ask who killed your father until you are firmly holding a matchete from the right side? So what was Biafra’s handle on the basis of which the world was told that no power in black Africa could subdue her?

These, I must add, are questions that I think we should all bear in mind, as we confront situations such as when those returning home to Nigeria after Biafra found a country not too different from the one they left. Unhappily, the Biafra they knew maltreated Biafrans as much if not more than Nigeria kept maltreating Nigerians. To be borne in mind is that much of it came more from improper organizational setups, plain incompetence, rather than sheer wickedness or hatred as we are all being made to believe when we come to it. Rather than describe the problems with a clarity that allows for seeking genuine solutions, we get all manner of exorbitance, which push away answers and solutions. For instance, as a way of laying a basis for more disharmony between ex-Biafrans and fellow Nigerian siblings, we are not told about the many who returned to find that their properties were intact and that people actually protected their rights in those properties in their absence. We are not told about the many valiant efforts that were made by other Nigerians to rehabilitate the East. It may not have been more competently done than all the other things that were happening in the country. But quite a brave effort it was, making it possible for General Yakubu Gowon, whatever his many lapses, to be seen internationally as doing a yeoman’s job, personifying his unitarian precepts including an immediate representation of the East in the Supreme Military Council after the war. For that matter, there were too many elements of a siblings war, at least from the Federal side, in spite of the inevitability of both sides seeking and using the most deadly weapons that money could buy. Take it from the start of police action to full scale war; the charge to soldiers to a close observance of the Geneva convention during the war, the implied necessity to treat all the captured fairly and decently - and many were court-martialed who broke the rules – right through to the post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction. The No Victor No Vanquished code may have had flabs but the re-absorption of former soldiers back into the Nigerian military, many of whom soon became high flying, and civil servants, who were granted special three weeks leave and granted ‘mercy pay’ to help them settle down, all these are not heard of in the post-war propaganda. Nor is it heard enough about the special clearance for ships bringing in post-war reliefs.
After the war, there was clearly more than a silver lining which ought to be acknowledged even in the face of the harsh circumstances that existed. It is in the fact declared by SG Ikoku, the Commissioner for Economic Development in East Central State in the Daily Times of May 22, 1971 that “the Federal Government had made available 21.505 million pounds grant and 10.620 million as advances and loans. It was part of the accumulated amounts saved for the East Central State during the war by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the Commissioner for Finance and Vice Chairman of the Federal Executive Council, on the basis of population distribution of revenue. No one, these days, is ever allowed to know this little matter even if the point is to show how well those who wanted the Biafrans dead followed the financial regulations that guided the Federation and so kept what was due to the East in reserve for them till they returned to the fold. This is not even to ask about how the money was actually spent, which I am sure must be blamed on those who had saved the money. Besides, there really ought now to be a cross-check of Awolowo’s claim that he saved African Continental Bank post-haste in order to help shore up the economy of the East. Or how quickly the Niger bridge was rebuilt, the cement factories rehabilitated and the African Development Bank cashiered into rehabilitation work with agricultural loans that Federal authorities had to look away from appraising on strict terms. Such things were left in the way that those who took monies from Biafra to buy food and ammunition but failed to deliver have been forgotten with their loot of war.

This is why, across the social media, it is painful to encounter the many angry discussants of the civil war years who see it only in terms of what needed to have been done for the East. We hear so much so much about the absolute deprivation of Biafrans through the granting of N20 ex-gratia payment (slightly more than the equivalent of a third class clerks monthly pay) to every survivor after the war. It is forgotten that it was meant as a short-term welfare package to enable many get back to their homes from wherever they were at when the war ended. It was not meant to be payment for being rebels or as an exchange for Biafran money. That was why it was called ex-gratia. It was supposed to be a provisional payment while sorting out those who could still find the papers to prove how much they had in their accounts. Accountably, the system collapsed. Only a few could have managed to keep their papers who had not already emptied their accounts while they were leaving a country they did not intend to come back to.

Admittedly, the whole matter called for a special exercise of leadership on all sides.

It called for genuine brokerage techniques, of lobbying and even muzzling of whoever was in authority to act beyond the rule of law and to find a way of resolving the clearly confused circumstance of so many people having Biafran money in a country where it was impossible to regard it as legal tender. But just as in the planning for the war, there was so much left undone even in the manner and mode of surrender. After the war, I used to wonder why the leaders dissolved into atoms. I am saying this partly because I am yet to meet someone who has vouchsafed a formula that could have resolved the matter of the ex-gratia payments without rancor. Even today, no one is volunteering how it could have been done better. The same goes for the issue of abandoned property which no longer had a public advocacy once Sam Mbakwe who had briefed Awolowo to take the matter to court was importuned to withdraw it on the awkward reasoning that if Awolowo won the case in court he would make political capital out of it. It became a case of better not fight the abandoned property issue for the masses, if some old enemy would share in the glory. Hence the matter festered till it became a case of everyone for himself. The General of the People’s Army had to wait till as late as the last week of General Ibrahim Babangida in office in 1993 to wrest his own abandoned property. We don't know about those who never had that
The shame of the moment is that, unable to look the history of our differences in the face, we allow ourselves to be flattered or incensed by sheer serenades of ethnic and regional fictions. Even those who know that it is bad for their ethnic groups to seek to live like islands unto themselves are gleefully developing discrepant moralities: a benign one for themselves and a pernicious or predatory morality for others. It is usually based on bad logic and poor thinking, as much of this narrative has shown. The point is, when people think badly they want to hide it by putting the rest of us in situations where, if we disagree, we can be accused of being haters of their ethnic group or nationality. So I may be told that a proverb belongs to an ethnic group so that if I disagree with the bad thinking that goes with it I may be charged with pushing for ethnocide or genocide. It is a form of blackmail that yields backwardness for a people. It something that deserves to be back-handed off. We should feel free to show our dislike for it. When people are being roughed up by their own, we should all cry out as when they are being roughed up by other people. By the same token, if bad logic is claimed for or by an ethnic group, we need to see it as self-immolation on everyone’s part to sit quiet and say it is their business. It is not just their business. Because their bad logic will not let neighbours live well or rest in peace. It obliges us to be always our brothers’ keepers. Even then, we need always to contest the veracity of what is claimed against other perceptions of reality. Until cultural empathy is achieved or approximated. I mean: not even the disabilities and pains of one life authorizes that life to deny other lives their due.

This makes it truly odd, to see it being suggested so incongruously, at the end of the war, that it was those who hated Igbo people who were working so hard to bring them back to Nigeria by force! Or who were threatening to leave Nigeria if the Igbo were ever to be allowed to go; and going the whole hog to plead with Igbo leaders not to go to war! It does not add up. It may be good for war propaganda to tone the hatreds that shored up the conflict. But it does not make good post-war logic. Irrespective of the polemics and rhetorical afflatus that, since then, have bedeviled public arguments with notions of how Nigeria has no future, it is clear that a Nigeria together, as it is, even with all the poor quality of the quarrels that we all have with one another, is a better country than the fractionized mayhem, each acting like a mini anarchic Nigeria, which we would otherwise have to deal with, in the event of a break-up. On this score, it is such a fantastic deal to have an Awolowo, solid, disciplined, thoughtful, far-seeing, on the right side. He believed in the country and showed it during the civil war. He deserves to be truly lionized for it, not left in the brambles of the fiction-mongers who wish to turn the re-uniting of Nigeria into ashes in the mouths of all succeeding generations. The truth is that, even without the benefit of a poll, it can be safely asserted that there are too many Nigerians who agreed and still agree that Nigeria deserved to have been saved from disintegration and kept as one country. Some may be having second thoughts because of some recent events. But Nigeria as one country was a business well worth doing. The mode in which the Igbo are all over Nigeria proves it. We must not allow ourselves to be intimidated into regressing in the tripe of those who do not agree. No question about it: this country is still the closest that Africa has to one that is able to stand up to the rest of the world and thrive for the good of all Africans. Even the supposed differences that some people deplore, and Awolowo spent his
life seeking to re-engineer in creative directions, are actually part of the strength of this country. Who wants to live in a country that is all winnowed ethic, one monochrome, without arguments and debates, and all dead matter, mere ornament! The point is to prepare all concerned to work for a defined future rather than merely grumbling, seeking scapegoats for our own failings, dousing it with cynical rhetoric, while waiting for an undefined future like manna from heaven.

My grouse, in this regard, is that the issues, as they concern the civil war, are not being discussed in terms of what the leaders of the East owed the people but failed to deliver. Most of the intellectuals and leaders of opinion go about seeking to entrench fictions that merely disable the capacity of the ex-Biafrans to build with other Nigerians. The good thing is that the average Igbo man and woman is way ahead of the griping ones who do not know that the civil war ended long ago. They are everywhere long gone beyond sweating talk about how to become Nigerians. They have proved it that they are just bloody Nigerians like the rest of us. Others, instead of helping the people to think through the necessity to get empowerment through education, industry and genuine employment, are busy reproducing fictions that landed the country in the current mess of incivility. Adding no value to existing answers beyond the fluff of ethnic nationalism that masquerades as high-mindedness, they are blaming neighbors for the mess they helped to create by not caring or standing up for an identifiable principle. It is certainly no way to go. Similarly, the habit of shouting “my people, my people” has become a way of not caring for or about the people. This can be proved by simply asking why all the governments in the zone contrived so much helplessness for forty years while the roads in the East deteriorated to war-time conditions. In a region where trade is an eze with feathers on a red cap, you would have expected that all the governments in the zone would come together as a matter of emergency to tackle the monster that was ruining the ethic of commerce. A people so energetic and gutsy, pumping so much enterprise across the country ought really never to be seen so self-neglecting as to be waiting for others to raise or de-maginalize them. Unless as a strategy for getting more and more in the national spoils system! I mean, it is plain bad manners to blame other Nigerians who have not found answers to their problems and with whom cooperation is a fitter strategy than the politics of the gripe. At any rate, which part of Nigeria is in a good state? Where have industries not collapsed and public schools not been mired in a sorry state?

As I see it, a distracted individualism which some people prefer to describe as republicanism, is being priced above a genuine sitting down to plan with and for the people. What it calls for, instead of inventing enemies, and seeing competition in zero-sum terms, is a mobilization of affect and resources to rise above the disabilities that we all share as Nigerians. We do need to bring the civil war to a proper end by looking into the past without flinching and wresting ourselves from the goblins of pernicious fictions. The bottomline, as I have argued in Taking Nigerian Seriously, is that there is no Igbo solution to the Nigerian problem; no Yoruba, Efik, Hausa, Fulani, Edo, Ijaw, or Kanuri solution. Until we allow cultural empathy to govern the roost, and we learn to work consciously for the much maligned geographical expression to accede to heightening the cultural expression that it has already much become, the tendency to take refuge in pernicious fictions will not abate.