

Achebe's *There Was A Country In The Court Of Public Opinion: 43 Years After The Nigerian Civil War*

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Abstract

The Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 ended with the then military government of Gen. Gowon maintaining the "No Victor, No Vanquished" posture. This was despite the fact that the defunct Biafra, as it were, clearly lost out with millions of casualties, mostly women and children. This posture, with all its criticisms from those who insisted that Biafrans should be treated as prisoners of war, was maintained by the then Head of State who believed it was a reconciliatory take off point. Ever since, several policies, and programmes have been put in place to reduce the hostility between the then Biafrans (now mainly South- Easterners and a few South-Southerners) and the rest of the country. At the point when available evidence was suggesting that the hostility was reducing, late Prof. Chinua Achebe published a controversial book, "There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra," in 2012. This book, with a detailed account of the war, analysts argue, has reengineered hostility, "thereby bringing to naught all reconciliatory moves made in the last forty-two years." Considering Achebe's intellectual capacity, world status and what he represented, especially to the Igbo nation, one is tempted to agree with these analysts. However, such conclusion could be hasty without empirical proof. Therefore, the obvious questions are: has the book in any way influenced Nigerians to construct or reconstruct their memories of the war? Is it leading to fresh hostility, considering the fact that he accused prominent Nigerians of genocide? Qualitative and quantitative data generated through interview, questionnaire and focus group discussion revealed that the book has influenced Nigerians to construct and reconstruct negative memories of the war.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War • Memory Construction • Reengineering Hostility

Prologue

The finest of wordsmiths can never describe accurately in words the unfortunate events of 1967-1970 in Nigeria. Not even the most articulate of historians and anthropologists can put across the horrors and sorrows of that thirty months avoidable civil war which has remained devastating in the memories of many Nigerians especially the direct victim-the *Ndi-Igbo*. Paroxysms of grief that accompanies the recall of the over three million men, women and children that lost their lives to the war remain more devastating. Unfortunately, the scope of this article does not accommodate any attempt to arrogate to ourselves the positions of finest wordsmiths nor articulate historians and anthropologists which effectively barred us from telling a complete story of the war. Our major concern here is to investigate how a story told of the war by one of African finest writers, Late Prof. Chinua Achebe, has influenced such devastating memories.

Although a full history of the Nigerian Civil War of July, 1967- January 1970, is not the major concern of this article, an incursion into the history is needed to place the influence of Achebe's last book, "*There was a Country: A personal History of Biafra*", on the collective and individual memories of Nigerians in context.

The Nigerian civil war was an outcome of many ugly events during 1914 and 1967. After over a century reign of British colonial power in the hitherto independent nations in West Africa, they were erroneously merged as a single country in 1914 under the name, *Niger Area* (Nigeria) without recourse to their ethnic, religious, political, economic and social diversities. As Achebe would say:

Great Britain was handed the area of West Africa that would later become Nigeria, like a piece of chocolate cake at a birthday party. [And] if the Berlin Conference sealed her [Nigeria] fate, then the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates inextricably complicated Nigeria's destiny (Achebe, 2012,p.1).

Upon independence in 1960, Nigeria became a three-region federal state of Eastern region (dominated by Igbos), Northern region (dominated by Hausa-Fulani) and Western regions (dominated by Yorubas) and later four, with the creation of Mid-West region out of the Western region. The mid west region, though

ethnically diverse, was home to Ibibios, Efiks, Ijaws and others. With this unequal regional formation, the fear that one region could dominate others and gain control over federal assemblies and the allocation of the country's resources led to the ugly political upheavals in 1964 and 1965 which culminated into a bloody coup of 15th January 1967 led by late major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu (an Easterner). The coup which was perceived as an Igbo grand design to dominate the country led to the death of many leaders from the northern and western extractions including the then Prime Minister, Abubakar, Tafawa Balewa (northerner) (Bird and Ottanelli, 2011, p.3).

The end result of Nzeogwu's ill-fated coup which, according to him, was "to establish a strong, unified and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife," was the 1967 pogrom orchestrated by both civilians and soldiers in northern Nigeria which left thousand of Igbos massacred (Obasanjo, 2002,p.6). The inability of then Head of State, Colonel Yakubu Gowon who overthrew General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi to tame the tide of violence against the Igbos in the North and the uncompromising stand of Colonel Odimegwu Ojukwu (military governor of Eastern region) led to the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war (Madiebo, 1980, p.22). When the dust of the war settled in January 1970, three million Biafrans, mostly women and children, had died, in contrast to one hundred thousand casualties on the federal side (Saro-Wiwa, 2012,para. 6). Incontrovertibly, many Nigerians, especially the *Ndi- Igbo* who suffered direct hit from the unfortunate war are yet to recover forty-three years after.

To help *Ndi- Igbo* recover, the then military government of Gowon maintained "No Victor, No Vanquished" posture and subsequently set up the National Rehabilitation Commission. Through this Commission, the 'Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation' policy of the Federal government came to full force and saw many Igbos reabsorbed into Nigerian Army and other sectors. This does not diminish the fact that many questioned the genuineness and effectiveness of the policy. To further ensure reconciliation, the National Youth Service Scheme was equally introduced.

At the point when available evidence was suggesting that the hostility between Igbos and their Hausa and Yoruba neighbours was beginning to reduce, late Prof. Chinua Achebe published a controversial book, "*There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*," in 2012. In his 333- paged book, Achebe who was regarded as a literary giant in the world, made far reaching accusations and clarifications. In the page 233 of the book, Achebe accused late Chief Obafemi Awolowo of initiating a policy of food blockade that saw the starvation of over two million Igbo women and children. In the words of Achebe:

It is my impression that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was driven by overriding ambition for power, for himself in particular and for the advancement of his Yoruba people in general. And let it be said that there is, on the surface, at least, nothing wrong with those aspirations. However, Awolowo saw the dominant Igbos at the time as obstacles to that goal, and when the opportunity arose – the Nigeria- Biafra war- his ambition drove him into a frenzy to go to every length to achieve his dreams. In the Biafran case it meant hatching up a diabolical policy to reduce the number of his enemies significantly through starvation- eliminating over two million people, mainly members of future generations (Achebe, 2012, p.233).

Achebe also published what he said was Awolowo's response to such policy. According to Achebe, a statement credited to Chief Awolowo who was the Finance minister at the time, and echoed by his cohort reads:

All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I do not see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder.

This statement was seen by Achebe and many as callous and unfortunate. For many local and foreign observers, the policy was nothing far from a grand design to exterminate *Ndi- Igbo* from the face of the earth. This accusation was also extended to the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, who approved such policy.

As soon as the book was published by Penguin Group in late 2012, so many reviews were written by both Nigerians and foreigners; all from different perspectives. Many reactions followed. While the populace from the Igbo extraction tended to praise Achebe's account as a true representation of what transpired, many other from the Yoruba and Hausa circles saw it as a distortion of the fact. The Yoruba elites, especially, saw the book as a calculated attempt to discredit their late political and spiritual leader, Chief Awolowo. Prominent among those who went viral on the news media to hold brief for Awo was the former minister of aviation, Mr. Femi Fani –Kayode (a Yoruba son). According to Kayode:

Sadly, it is in the light of such historical revisionism that I view Professor Chinua Achebe's assertion (which is reflected in his latest and highly

celebrated book titled "There Was A Country") that Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the late and much loved Leader of the Yoruba, was responsible for the genocide that the Igbos suffered during the civil war. This claim is not only false but it is, also, frankly speaking, utterly absurd. Not only is Professor Achebe indulging in perfidy, not only is he being utterly dishonest and disingenuous but he is also turning history upside down and indulging in what I would describe as ethnic chauvinism (Vanguard Newspaper, 2012, para 5).

Kayode's comment did not go down well with *Ndi- Igbo* who saw him as a tribal chauvinist. Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, equally said Achebe made a mistake by publishing such an account at the time Nigeria was trying to move ahead. According to Soyinka, "It is however a book I wish he had never written, that is, not in the way it was" (Fashu, 2013, para.5).

Going by the concept of 'collective memory' which rests upon the assumption that every social group develops a memory of its past; a memory that emphasizes its uniqueness and allows it to preserve its self-image and pass it on to future generations, one wonders the kind of memory Achebe's book has created (Neiger 2010 p. 3). Has it in anyway endangered the fragile peace existing between former Biafrans and the rest of Nigeria? This, the work provides answers to.

The Puzzle

Ever since Hugo Van Hofmannsthal coined the term 'Collective Memory' in 1902, Work Social scientists have been trying to understand how media contents influence individual memories and collective memories. Although many have disagreed with initial observations on how media contents induce individuals and groups to construct and reconstruct memories of the past, available evidences suggest that the media play key role in this respect (Neiger 2010 p. 3).

In the light of the above, one wonders whether Chinua Achebe's last book, "*There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra*", has in any way induced Nigerians in constructing and reconstructing their memories of the bloody civil war, and whether it will define Nigeria's future political, social and economic engagements. These are, indeed, the problem of this study.

Why the Study

For us to have a clear understanding of where we are headed, the following objectives came to mind:

- I. To find out the kind of memory Nigerians had about the Nigerian civil war before Achebe's personal account of the war came to public domain.
- II. To ascertain whether Achebe's account of the war influenced Nigerians in constructing and reconstructing their civil war memories.
- III. To establish whether ethnic prejudice contributed to such memories' construction and reconstruction.

Probing Questions

- I. What kind of memory did Nigerians have about the Nigeria civil war before Achebe's personal account of the civil war came to public domain?
- II. In what ways has Achebe's account of the civil war influenced Nigerians in constructing and reconstructing their civil war memories?
- III. How has ethnic prejudice contributed to such memories' construction and reconstruction?

The Gains

For one thing, the findings of this study have revealed in clear terms the mental and physical hostilities among the various ethnic groups that have been reengineered as a result of Achebe's account of the war. The study has equally provided a platform for researchers to further investigate how the reconstructed memories of *Ndi-Igbo* has impacted on their socio-political relations with their Yoruba and Hausa brothers and how this will define/redefine future political engagements.

Opinions and Facts about Media Memory Studies: A Review

In this section, we shall review limited materials on how the media construct and reconstruct memories individually and collectively. This will enable us to put in context the likely influence Achebe's account of the Nigeria- Biafra war has on the individual and collective memories of Nigerians. Before then, let's take a look at certain concepts that form the basis for this study.

Memory as a phenomenon in cognitive psychology, according to Neiger (2010 p. 13), is the ability to store, possess, and retrieve information which have a physiological aspect, in a neurological dimension. This explains why people remember personal events whether significant or insignificant which are part of their everyday life. That is individual memory. On the other hand, some events may be “jointly remembered by other people who may or may not have a tangible record of the event (e.g. a wedding video), but they are usually classified as personal memories”. In some other case, people remember public events which have gained social or political meanings and are recognized as having cultural value as a collective event (Neiger 2010 p. 13). Having seen what memory is, our next occupation is to look at the concept of media memory. This will help us understand why, how and when individuals or groups remember past events and how they define future relationships.

According to Neiger (2010 p. 1) “media memory studies are a ‘descendant’ of both media research and memory scholarship – two multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary fields of study”

Umeh (2009, p. 13) sees the concept as two breakaway republics of Media and Psychology. Kitch (2005, P.175) sees media memory studies as an important theoretical and analytical concept with multilayered and complex nature. He further explained that:

This multidimensional field of inquiry studies how the media operate as memory agents (What kinds of versions of the past are shaped by different media? What is the ‘division of labor’ between local and global media or between commercial and public media?); the cultures in which these processes take place (Media Memory as an indicator for sociological and political changes); and the interrelations between the media and other realms of social activity (such as the economy and politics) (Kitch, 2005, P.175).

In essence, Kitch explanation helps us to understand how the media shape the memory of the past within a given culture and subsequently serve as indicator for sociological and political changes. It equally prepares a platform for us to come to terms with the idea of collective memory research which this work is all about.

The term ‘collective memory’ according to Neiger (2010 p. 2) “was first coined by Hugo Van Hofmannsthal in 1902... but French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is generally recognized as the founder of collective memory research”. Halbwachs’ work, Neiger posits, “identified individual memories and collective memories as tools through which social groups establish their centrality in individuals’ lives” (Neiger 2010 p. 2). Ever since, studies have shown how social groups construct their own images of the world around them by constantly constructing and reconstructing versions of past events. In all this, the role of the media can never be over emphasized. In a large part, the media which have dominated every facet of our lives play significant role in shaping our individual and collective memories (Silverstone, 1994, 1999 cited in Neiger 2010 p. 2).

The ugly memories of the Nigeria- Biafra war could have probably remained in the past if not that the media (books mostly) chose to remember it. Possibly the over thirty books that have been written so far on the civil war and mass media reference to it may have constructed some kind of memories (Umeh, 2009, p.11). Edgerton’s (2000) cited in Neiger (2010 p. 3) in her analysis of the role of American journalists in shaping the public memory of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, quoted Zelizer (1992) as saying:

The story of America’s past will remain in part a story of what the media have chosen to remember, a story of how the media’s memories have in turn become America’s own. And if not the authority of journalists, then certainly the authority of other communities, individuals and institutions will make their own claims to the tale ... It is from just such competition that history is made.

In the same vein, Murray (2011, p. 64) explains that Americans still remember vividly the events of September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States through the instrumentality of the media. He explains that:

Americans, for the most part, quite clearly recall the facts of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, right down to how many planes were hijacked, where they hit and which airlines were involved. ..., says psychologist William Hirst, PhD, a memory researcher at the New School for Social Research. In a Lexis Nexis analysis, Hirst found that major media outlets barely covered the Challenger compared with the barrels of ink and millions of pixels they’ve devoted to 9/11. To the extent that the media continues to talk about 9/11, the more our memories of the attacks are solidified,” says Hirst. “We as a society came to believe that we have to talk about this all the time. We decided that this will

be important, with an accompanying memory-strengthening effect (Murray, 2011,p.64).

As explained earlier, “the concept of ‘collective memory’ rests upon the belief that almost every social group or individuals develops a memory of its past; a memory that emphasizes its uniqueness and allows it to preserve its self-image and pass it on to future generations.” As such, collective memory cannot be seen as evidence of the reality of a shared past, rather it is, a version of the past, selected to be remembered by a given community or individuals in order to advance its goals and serve its self-perception (Neiger, 2010 p. 4). This to a large extent helps us to understand how some of the many books written on Nigerian civil war have helped to shape the collective memories of Nigerians. The latest by Achebe appears to be the most controversial as it has provoked reactions from all parts of Nigeria especially from Yorubas who saw the accusation made by Achebe as an affront on their late political and Spiritual leader.

Theoretical Underpinning

Dynamic Memory Theory

Dynamic Memory Theory provides theoretical backing to this work. LittleJohn and Foss (2009, p.114) write that “In their early work on people’s ability to understand and remember narratives, Roger Schank and Robert Abelson gave emphasis to the role of *scripts*—long-term memory structures representing familiar sequences of events (e.g., visiting a restaurant).” LittleJohn and Foss (2009, p.114) also explained that subsequent empirical research showed “a description of the memory structures involved in processing current events by relating them to previous similar experiences”. The main point of this theory is that people tend to remember past events and tie them to present or future events especially when the media are involved. This theory helps us to understand, how and why Nigerians reconstructed their memories after reading Achebe’s work and how these memories will influence future engagements.

How the Study was Executed

In conducting this study, the triangulation mixed method design which allows for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data was used. The beauty of this method is that “the researcher gathers both quantitative and qualitative data; compares result from the analysis of both data and make an interpretation as to whether the result from both support or contradicts each other” (Creswell, 2002,p. 565). A basic rationale for this design is that one data collection form supplies strength to offset the weaknesses of the other form.

In collecting quantitative data, the survey method of enquiry was adopted. This is because survey lends itself as the most appropriate method of quantitative enquiry on an issue for possible generalization. This method enabled the researchers to administer questionnaire to respondents in the whole country. For qualitative data, in-depth interview and focus group discussions were conducted in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. This enabled the researchers to probe further into some issues raised in the course of questionnaire administration.

The population of the study comprises all Nigerians. According to information provided by the National Population Commission (NPC) based on 2006 population census result, the population of Nigeria is 140, 431,790. A sample size of 400 was drawn from this population at 0.05 error margin using Taro Yamani formula. Six state capitals were systematically selected from the thirty-six states that make up Nigeria giving that one was selected from each of the six geo-political zones in the country. The cities are Enugu (South-East Zone), Ikeja (South West Zone), Port Harcourt (South-South Zone), Makurdi (North-central Zone), Kaduna (North West Zone) and Yola (North-East Zone). After using proportional representational technique to apportion copies of questionnaire to these selected cities, purposive sampling technique was employed to select Nigerians who have read the book, *There Was a Country: A personal History of Biafra*, or those who have read at least the review of the book in newspapers. Those who read only the review of the book were found to be even more controversial than those who actually read the complete book because of the controversies the book generated. This is because most of the reviews merely drew the attention of the world to alleged genocide perpetuated by Gen. Gowon and Chief Awolowo.

For the in-depth interview, twelve opinion and political leaders were purposively selected from the four major groups that fought the war for the exercise, giving that four persons were drawn from four groups. The groups include, Igbos, Hausa-Fulanis, Yorubas and core South-southerners that were somewhat neutral during the war but constituted the group *Ndi- Igbo* described as saboteurs. The interview were held at Port Harcourt (South-southerner), Enugu (Igbos), Ikeja(Yorubas) and Kaduna (Hausa-Fulanis). This was done in order to probe into some of the issues that the questionnaire could not address because of its rigid nature. Those interviewed were mostly elders.

Focus group discussions were equally conducted to probe further into certain issues raised during interview stage. For instance, most of the respondents argued that the young ones were most likely to raise certain questions one day because of Achebe’s accusation. The researcher felt that this point should be followed up by asking youth leaders what they felt about the book. Focus group discussions were, therefore, used to dig deeper into the issue. To this end, three focus groups, made up of six participants each, were assembled in Enugu, Ikeja and Kaduna.

To ensure validity and reliability of the three measuring instruments used in the study, face validity and test re-test techniques were used to ensure validity and reliability respectively.

WHAT WE FOUND

Presentation of Quantitative Data

In this section, quantitative data generated through the questionnaire are presented. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaire distributed, 31 copies were not properly filled, hence a mortality rate of 7.7 percent.

Research Question one: What kind of memory did Nigerians have about the Nigeria civil war before Achebe’s personal account of the civil war came to public domain?

To answer this research question, item number 9 in the designed questionnaire were used.

Table 1: What was your perception of the Nigeria- Biafra war before Achebe wrote his last book, *There was a Country*?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
It was an unfortunate war we wished never happened	229	62.1%
The war was necessary to keep Nigeria together	77	20.9%
I hated talking about it	34	9.2%
Can’t say	29	7.9%
Total	369	100

In table 1 above, the researchers wanted to know what the perception of Nigerians was about the civil war before Achebe wrote his last book. The data generated revealed that 229 respondents representing 62.1 percent saw the war as an unfortunate event that they wished never happened; 77 respondents representing 20.9 percent saw the war as an unnecessary action needed to keep the country together; 34 respondents representing 9.2 percent said they hated talking about it, while 29 respondents representing 7.9 percent could not say what they felt about the war. The implication of this is that a majority of Nigerians wished the war never happened. This is a positive indication.

Qualitative Data

The gap noticed from the quantitative data generated under this research question led to the use of interview and focus group discussion.

Interview

The interview conducted revealed that those interviewed reacted along ethnic lines. The four Igbos interviewed in Enugu argued that the memory of the war had always remained with them ever before Achebe wrote his controversial book. Chief Chukwudi, from Enugu said that the memory of the war would “*always remain with them*”. He further argued that “*no son or daughter of Ndi-Igbo will ever forget the sorrows of that war*”. Chief Okonkwo maintained that “*though Ndi-Igbo suffered heavy casualties during the war, they must let go*”. For Dr. Anorue, it was “*a war we should say never again*”. Dr. Nnaji concluded that he was letting go of the memory of the civil war before Achebe changed his mind with his book.

The next group interviewed was four Hausa-Fulanis selected. Mallam Labaran said Nigerians must let go with or without Achebe. Alhaji, Ahmed said, “*honestly, I thought we had walked past the civil war. I saw the Igbos as my brothers and I think I still do. Achebe’s work is not a good one*”. For Mallam Ciroma, “*I thought the war that almost destroyed us was gone until Achebe wrote his evil book; God will forgive him*”. Dr. Luka, maintained that *his people remembered less of the war before Achebe’s war came*”.

The four Yorubas interviewed took the same direction of their Hausa-Fulani counterpart except for Dr. Ronke, who said that “*everybody forgot the war except the Igbos who suffered more. Where you expecting them to let go*”? Also, Mr. Gbenga, said he was afraid “*that Achebe has revisited an issue that might destroy Nigeria*”. Four South –Southerns that were interviewed held that the memories of the war must be left to go by all Nigerians. They, however, condemned Achebe for writing the book which they argued was like sowing a seed of discord among Nigerians. For instance, Mr. Fubara said “*Achebe was living in the pass. He does not understand*

that such an account coming from a civilian like him has the tendency of provoking hatred among young people whom he even acknowledged he was writing for.”

An analysis of the responses generated through these interviews revealed that a majority of those interviewed had decided to forget the wounds of the war and remain united. Even those who were not willing to forget the horrors of the war still saw all Nigerians as one.

Focus Group Discussions

In order to follow up on the allegation that Achebe's books portends danger to Nigerian youths which might define future political engagements, three focus groups discussions were held in Enugu, Ikeja and Kaduna. The outcome of the discussions revealed that Nigerian youths were divided on the kind of memory the book has constructed or influenced.

The six youth leaders that participated in the discussion in Kaduna argued that the book has actually shown them that *Ndi-Igbo* are yet to forget the ugly events of that war. According to Bello:

Achebe does not really understand the implication of what he has written. He forgot that this has brought back all what we are trying to forget. As a learned and well respected Nigerian, he ought to have understood that the unity this nation enjoys is fragile and needs to be kept that way until such a time that we shall all let go. What he has done is nothing short of telling Igbo youths to wake up and retaliate against any Yoruba or Hausa man living in Nigeria. The fallout of his account is deadlier than any nuclear weapon ever built on earth; make no mistakes, it must destroy us one day.

Adamu who also participated in the discussion wondered why Achebe of all people came up with a book like this. For him *“Achebe has further stirred up a lot of things that might hurt the future generations. Before he wrote that ill-fated book, many of us and our Igbo brothers had let go”*. The positions of Adamu and Bello were echoed by the other four participants.

The discussion in Enugu involving Igbos revealed that five out of the six participants showered praises on Achebe for writing the book which they said has corrected the misrepresentations in Obasanjo's account of the war. However, one of the participants, Miss Joy Okonkwo held that Achebe made a grave mistake by writing the book. According to her, the book has radically changed the perception of her elder brother who almost slapped a Hausa man who was manning their gate after reading the book. She further revealed that:

Just after he attempted slapping our gateman who has been manning our gate even before he was born, he threatened to make life terrible for my sister if she attempted to marry her man who is a Yoruba man. Believe me, his views about the Yorubas and Hausas have changed completely because of Prof. Achebe's account. Unfortunately, he appears to be getting support from my father who witnessed the war first hand. But this was a young man whose best friend was our gateman. The Achebe I respected has gone frenzy.

The discussion at Ikeja revealed many shocking details. All the six Yoruba participants were on the offensive against Achebe. They maintained that Achebe was out to cause a serious problem between them and their Igbo brothers and sisters. The most outspoken among them all was Mr. Gbede. According to him:

Achebe who was out to discredit our leader ended up heating up the politics of the Nigeria –Biafra war. He has shown us that he wants Nigerian youths to go back to the battle field. If not, what was he trying to achieve by saying that a Yoruba man starved two million Igbos to death? This book will definitely come to hunt him or his children one day. My advice to all Nigerian youths is not to take him seriously. He has failed to fuel hatred amongst us.

Summary of Research Question One

From the quantitative and qualitative data generated from interviews, questionnaire and focus group discussions result revealed that majority of Nigerian youths were not keen about the events of the war before Achebe came up with his book. This finding is supported by the position of Zelizer (1992) cited in Neiger (2010,p.3) which found that *“the story of America's past will remain in part a story of what the media have*

chosen to remember, a story of how the media's memories have in turn become America's own". Note that books are the oldest and one of the strongest mass medium of all times.

Research question two: In what ways has Achebe's account of the civil war influenced Nigerians in constructing and reconstructing their civil war memories?

To answer this research question, item number 14 in the designed questionnaire were used.

Table 2: Can you say that Prof Achebe's account of the war has influenced your civil war memory?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	307	83.2
No	38	10.3%
Can't say	24	6.5%
Total	369	100

Information in the table above revealed that 307 respondents representing 83.2 percent said that Achebe's account of the war has influenced their civil war memories; 38 respondents representing 10.3 percent said it did not, while 24 respondents could not say whether it influenced them or not. The implication of the above data is that Nigerians believe that Achebe's account of the war as contained in his last book has indeed influenced them to construct and reconstruct their memories of the war.

Qualitative Data

The gap noticed from the quantitative data generated under this research question led to the use of interview and focus group discussion. Interview is presented first.

Interview

For the interview,

The four Igbos interviewed in Enugu argued that their memories of the war have been influenced a great deal. Chief Chukwudi, from Enugu maintained that the book opened his eyes to the wickedness of a Yoruba man who he thought was his brother. According to him:

I was a young man when that war was fought but I never believed that Awolowo was responsible for that food blockade that led to the death of over two million Igbos. Achebe has opened my eyes to a lot of issues about a Yoruba man. Do you expect me to ever trust Yorubas again? Never again. Don't forget that Gen. Madiebo had reported in his own book that Awolowo betrayed Ojukwu during the war but I never believed it until I read Achebe's account of the war.

The remaining three interviewees equally held Chukwudi's position.

The next group interviewed was four Hausa-Fulanis selected. All of them accepted the fact that Achebe's account has influenced them a great deal in constructing new memories of the civil war. Dr Luka insisted that Prof Achebe should be arrested for inciting Igbos to fight the rest of the country. According to him:

You might not understand it now until my son or your son decides to kill a Yoruba man tomorrow because of this book. Believe it or not, he has reopened the dirty details of that unfortunate war that was orchestrated by two baby soldiers, Gowon and Ojukwu. The book is really inciting to say the least.

The four Yorubas interviewed took the same direction like their Hausa-Fulani counterparts. They all maintained that the book has influenced them negatively and has the tendency of raising issues tomorrow among young minds.

An analysis of the responses generated through these interviews revealed that majority of those interviewed believed that the book has influenced them a great deal to construct and reconstruct their memories of the war.

Focus Group Discussions

In order to follow up on some allegations made during the interview stage, three focus groups discussions were held in Enugu, Ikeja and Kaduna. The outcome of the discussions revealed that opinions were divided between Igbo participants and others on the kind of influence the book had. However, all of them acknowledged the fact that the book has led them to construct and reconstruct their civil war memories.

For Igbo participant in the focus group held in Enugu, the book has opened their eyes to the evil perpetuated by their Hausa and Yoruba neighbours. In fact, of the participants rebuked the moderator when he used the phrase,

“your Hausa and Yoruba brother”. These two maintained that a Hausa or Yoruba man can never be their brothers.

The focus group discussion conducted in Kaduna reemphasized the fact that Achebe book has seriously influenced Nigerians to construct and reconstruct their memories of the war. For instance, Bello who participated in the discussion argued that:

Achebe has reopened the era of mistrust and hatred which is capable of destroying the fragile peace the country currently enjoys. By accusing General Gowon and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, he has succeeded in causing serious problem in Nigeria. Some might want to argue that the book does not have serious influence because few people read it; this is not true because we have the interpersonal channels. In fact, those who have half information should be feared. Of course, they read commentaries, and newspapers gave it serious coverage. I am not surprised because an average Igbo man has a penchant for mischief.

Those who participated in the discussion held at Ikeja equally believed that the book has reshaped their memories of the war. Some of them accused Achebe and some Igbo leaders of trying to preach hate against the Yoruba nation. They all maintained that words alone can't explain the evil of book will cause in the near future.

Summary of Research Question Two

Both quantitative and qualitative data generated through questionnaire, interview and focus group discussions, revealed that Prof Achebe's account of the war influenced Nigerians to construct and reconstructed negative memories of the war. In essence, Achebe's work has the tendency of reengineering hostility among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The finding of this work is in line with what Murray (2011, p. 64) found. According to him, available evidence showed that the media can influence groups to construct and reconstruct negative memories of events.

Research question three: How has ethnic prejudice contributed to such memories' construction and reconstruction?

In answering research question three, both quantitative and qualitative data were generated through interviews, focus groups discussions and questionnaire.

Quantitative Data

In providing answers to other items in the questionnaire, the researchers observed that 87 percent of the respondent responded along ethnic lines. For example, 97 percent of all the respondents from Igbo extraction praised Achebe's account of the war. Those from the South-South were somewhat at the middle; 67 percent praised the work, while 33 condemned the work. 89 respondents from the three geo-political zones in the North did not see anything good in Achebe's work, just as 96 percent of Yoruba respondents also condemned the work. Obviously, they were mostly responding along ethnic lines. The implication of this is that ethnic prejudice played a serious role in memory construction and reconstruction.

Qualitative Data

The interview and focus group data presented under research questions one and two showed that a majority of the responses gotten had ethnic coloration. Ethnic prejudice came to the front burner in assessing the book. For instance, one of the participants, and Hausa man said:

Achebe was writing just like an average Igbo man that he is. No Igbo has ever seen anything good in a Hausa or Yoruba man. So I am not surprise for any reason. What Achebe has written is not short of a calculated attempt to discredit all of us. But he has failed. God will judge him.

The last sentence of Bello reveals serious ethnic prejudice and nothing more.

Summary of Research Question Three

Both quantitative and qualitative data generated have shown that ethnic prejudice played serious role in civil war memory reconstruction.

Summary of What Was Found

- I. Most Nigerians were almost letting go the terrible memories of the civil war before Achebe's personal account of the civil war came to public domain?
- II. Most Nigerians are now constructing and reconstructing negative memories of the war because of their exposure to Achebe's work. In essence, Achebe's work has drawn the attention of Nigerians to the way the war was executed, thereby influencing them to construct negative memories.

III. Ethnic prejudice contributed to such memories' construction and reconstruction.

Our Stand

- I. Prof. Chinua Achebe's work has influenced Nigerians to construct and reconstruct their memories of the war.
- II. The book has the tendency to define future political, social and economic engagements among the various ethnic groups in the country, as it will, in most cases serve as a reference point.
- III. The book has equally reopened the shocking details of the Nigeria – Biafra war.

Action Points

We recommend that media memory experts should conduct a wider study to strengthen or refute the findings of this work. This will enable us to make generalizations in the future. Again, we recommend that Achebe's account of the civil war should be seen more as a personal account. This will reduce the kind of tension it is generating. Finally, General Yakubu Gowon should equally publish his own account of the war like he promised in order for us to establish a balance, since former President Olusengu Obasanjo (a Yoruba man) has published his own account. In any case, whatever we think about the events of the past, we should not be slaves to it. What Nigeria needs at the moment is nothing short of good leadership.

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