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Book Review

Book Title: *The Other Side of Biafra*

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This is a very important and fascinating book. An addition to the deluge of books on the Nigeria-Biafra war, a war that ended five decades ago with the nation still grappling with its aftermath. It is a 19-chapter chronicle of “The Other Side of Biafra” by versatile journalist, Tony Amadi. The book is a most welcome addition to the litany of books on the Nigeria-Biafra war which can rightly illuminate some essential lessons that can help steer the country aright, albeit, the difference here is, why most of the previous books had dealt mainly with such aspects as the military offensive operations, diplomatic flurry of activities, humanitarian dimensions and auxiliary issues such as post-conflict peacebuilding efforts, other issues such as the economic and post-traumatic efforts at re-construction, re-building and re-uniting processes which characterized the (un) civil war have also been dealt with, but for this, this addition deals with what can be termed as the social aspect of the war; a story of a man, music, and musical bands during the war.

It might appear as an oddity with what obtains during a war but reading through the book exposes the fact, that regardless of what may be, humans will always be humans, even in the face of grave danger. Social historians and the general public should appreciate the great extent to which the author has gone to chronicle this gripping memoir which though talks about the shooting war tangentially but dwelt extensively on music and musical bands and how life was lived during that traumatic event. The author was able to prove that humans try to live in any situation, however, how terrible the condition is, man is built to thrive. Tony Amadi was able to bring fresh perspectives and new insights into and about the war,

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which hitherto was left substantially unreported. Admittedly, no single book can ever answer to all the nagging questions about the issue of the war. Well, in the face of relentless revisionism and outright lies being published about war then it is incumbent on historians, journalists, and social scientists to take up the task of righting such wrongs by publishing factual accounts of the events for the sake of posterity. No nation thrives on lies and revisionism and Nigeria cannot be an exception. The ultimate challenge of a nation especially one still trying to forge a common identity is therefore straightforward and it must be predicated on justice, fairness, and equity.

The book painted a picture of sweet-bitter experiences. It was a catalogue of events leading to the war and the ensuing drama of the absurdities that followed. The Nigeria-Biafra war which ended over half a decade ago is still hotly debated for obvious reasons. In Nigeria, needless politics has tainted virtually all that pertains to us. The name Biafra means a lot of things to different people, more so, given the sharp cleavages that persist and define the national contours of our national life, narratives that ought to educate the citizenry have become both a tool for dis-information and revisionism. This book has reaffirmed the ultimate essence of historical writing, which is to paint a factual account of the event. Regrettably, in Nigeria, many writers have become merchants of lies and revisionism. In the immediate aftermath of the war, it is doubtful that both the civil war and succeeding generations have been healed. Many still crave war and many still beat the drums of war most unapologetically in an attempt to redress perceived injustices. Injustice is real or perceived as a catalyst and an open chant for the resurgent Biafra agitation may not be an enduring solution to chants of marginalization. For the author of the book, he points to good fortune for being alive and cavasses the point that peaceful co-existence is a far better option than the inferno of war, indeed for a man that escaped death during the war, his pleas should be taken seriously.

The author is a man driven by a powerful sense of historical sense of duty to fill the gaps in a story that can indeed be a fountain of inspiration and instruction. This sense of duty made him overcome obstacles to have the book published. In this book, the author creditably and poignantly painted scenarios devoid of the actual military assaults that gave an impression that life goes on even in the grimmest of times. Human ingenuity birth scenes that make them happy even in the cloudy season of life such as even when a war is being waged, the people strove for happiness. The book was able to capture for posterity how in the middle of such humongous human tragedy a group of young lads could devote themselves to music, entertaining people, and fostering a strong social life. The book starts with life in Lagos in 1966 and its fair share of the London craze of the swinging sixties. Suffused with Beatle-mania, the pop culture was rife in those days.

His passion for the gripping stories that made the plot thick could be felt throughout the book. From one scene to another his passion during the war sustained him. Many died, many were maimed but many also survived. He was a survivor who lived to tell his story several decades after the war. At a point, things were bleak but he did not surrender. He

fought on. The book captured in detail multiple experiences; many too grim, some momentous but all fraught with the desire to live in the face of mortal danger. Even in war, the author sought opportunities. The entire book is about tales of courage, perseverance, and determination of people. But war is never an easy expedition, if it is possible, it is best to avoid it as the aftermath of the war between Nigeria-Biafra continues to echo and define relations between both people across both divides long after the guns have gone silent. Sadly, the Nigeria-Biafra war, or better still, the end of the war ought to have opened a new vista of opportunity for the nation but rather, it has opened another frontier in the complex game of politics amongst the people of Nigeria.

The chapters of the book were deftly hewn in a way that one flows into another effortlessly, compelling the reader to anticipate, salivate, and resist distractions by pushing ahead to the next chapter. The skill of the author as a seasoned journalist was evident throughout the book as he ensured balance, accuracy, and criticisms where and when necessary. His impressions were coloured by facts and not necessarily emotions. The first chapter titled; “Leaving Lagos for Biafra” chronicled the hurried departure of people of eastern extraction for the nation’s political capital. It was propelled by anxiety and palpable fear about a possible attack on Igbo residents in the federal capital. Already there were reported attacks on the people across the country especially in the northern part of the country and with each passing day foreboding with threats from the Federal Military Government and the calls by the Eastern Military Government for people of its origin to return to the eastern region for assured protection. It was only certain that the die was cast for a military onslaught when both governments failed to see eyeball to eyeball on the contending issues in play. The author recounted how the Biafran propaganda machinery coupled with other dynamics of that era propelled him to leave Lagos for the East. However, before leaving, he thought about what to venture into to fend for himself that would aid his survival once in Biafra. That critical question session(s) led him to assemble some musicians of Igbo extraction and agreed to return to the East with them.

In Chapter Two, titled; “The Journey to Biafra”, it chronicles the mounting pressure from all sides, as the author narrated his ordeal and how he escaped to the East to start life afresh. He was barely settled when Ojukwu, hinted at the possibility of a war through an interview in the Government House with the French television crew. On May 30, 1967, the inevitability of war became a stark reality when Ojukwu declared the birth of the Republic of Biafra. And before long, the federal forces launched an attack to re-admit the conclave back into the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The third chapter is titled “Biafra War Information Strategy”. If propaganda was the sole determinant for a positive outcome of the war, then Biafra would have succeeded, indeed, the secessionist enclave could have survived with the raw power of ingenuity of its propaganda efforts as the Federal Government of Nigeria was catching up per time. Newspaper publishers before the Biafra-Nigeria had considerable readership outside of Lagos in the Eastern cities of Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, and Port Harcourt. Huge sales were

made there as well as in Kaduna, so therefore, the leadership of the newly declared nation drove their media messages through the print media and radio. Television was still the exclusive preserve of city dwellers and signal was relatively low in the rural areas where the bulk of the people resided then.

In Chapter Four, the author storied how he floated a pop group which he titled; “The Emergence of the Fractions Pop Group”. Just almost immediately after coming out of forced detention, the author was faced with the onerous task of finding jobs for the musicians that he imported from Lagos. He quickly formed the Fractious, a five-piece pop group dedicated to playing soul music. Although Enugu was in a war mood, their gig sold out with more people milling outside the arena. His efforts paid up handsomely.

Chapter Five entitled, “The Fractious Invasion of Aba”. The author recounted that the band was forced to move out of Enugu when the city fell in 1967. They initially chose Owerri but realized it was essentially a provincial town even though their gigs fetched them sufficient crowds and funds to meet the challenges of living occasioned by the war. During the move, the author escaped death when a federal fighter plane on a routine offensive mission dropped bombs. That close shave forced a change from Owerri to Aba. The band opted to reside at the Ambassador Hotel in the central part of Aba. During the stint in Aba, the band was the favourite of the 58 Division of the Biafran Army under the command of Brigadier Anthony Eze. Despite the growing unease about the war efforts and the gloomy situation all around Biafra, Amadi and his team of pop stars provided some measure of fun for both the soldiers and civilians around Aba. With the intensity of the war, the band elected to move to Port Harcourt.

In Chapter Six, entitled “The Nkwerre Connection” the author established that self-preservation, a cardinal principle in the face of the raging war forced the band to move once again. At this time the Air Force jets had become a menace to the people living in major cities with many of such having been overrun by Nigerian firepower. In the battle of life and death, the author stated that Nkwerre became an ideal place to go and rest whenever the band was not in play. Despite the hardship occasioned by the war, the people of Biafra never shied away from enjoying an opportunity to recreate because the music was the only thing that had not been taken away from them by the brutality of the war.

In Chapter Seven, which the author titled, “The Garden City”. The band chose to operate from the Lido nightclub but was rejected. Their ordeal was caused by the fact that another pop group, the Hykkers was the resident at the club. This forced Tony Amadi and his band to seek refuge at the Emilia nightclub. Next, they mounted a massive publicity stunt which yielded a massive sold-out of their tickets. However, their respite in Port Harcourt was momentary as the inferno of war caught up with the Garden City, this caused the Fractious to consolidate their hold on their Aba base before the eventual fall of the city to the Federal Forces led by Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle.

Chapter Eight, which is titled, “Hykkers Move to Aba as Port Harcourt Falls”, chronicles the fall of the Garden City which forced a rival pop group, the Hykkers to Aba. The relationship between both pop groups was not exactly cordial. The Hykkers had ensured that the Fractious did not get a residency in their based Night Club, the Lido previously. Now the table had turned as Port Harcourt fell and the Hykkers were forced to flee to Aba without any instrument. They approached Fractious for the use of their home base and their equipment which they obliged.

For Chapter Nine, which the author titled, “Shadow at Lido”, this chapter was written by Dr. Onyezili and Dr. Eddie Iroh, former Director-General of Radio Nigeria. They catalogued the “music war” between pop groups within the Biafran territory, Port Harcourt to be precise. With sorrow, blood, and maimed, countless displaced, these musical shows helped mitigate the psychological impact of the war on the people.

As for Chapter Ten, the author entitled, “The Biafra’s Last Stand”, chronicles the struggle and how against their best efforts, the Biafran experiment was evaporating as time went by. The situation was horrific and it impacted the enterprise by musical bands to play music, hence, The Fractious were equally affected. The author portrayed the adverse impact of the war to the extent he said by around mid-1969, “the level of hunger and starvation was frightening, to put it mildly”. The chilling event and particularly the siege made the situation dire. It did not take long before the Fractious were conscripted. The author though conscripted, fled because in his assessment of the event, to go and fight with so marginal training was instant death which he was not ready to bargain for.

Chapter Eleven which the author entitled, “The Long Road to Owerri”, detailed the torturous and extremely ugly turn of events that led to the eventual collapse of the fledgling Republic of Biafra. He narrated how survival was not sustainable since the centre of gravity had been knocked off by the advancing federal forces. With Owerri retaken by the federal forces, the remaining Biafran fighting forces evaporated. The author was lucky when he found help from the hands of a federal soldier. The soldier led him to his Sergeant-Major who in turn led him to his commander, the famous Lt. Col. Alani Akinrinade.

Chapters twelve and thirteen dealt with the strategy that the Biafran employed to expose the humanitarian carnage and crisis which the war brought to bear on ordinary Biafrans. Enormous outrage attended the discovery which was handled by the Geneva-based public relations firm, Markpress. In Chapter Thirteen, the author storied the miracle that led to his removal from the war-torn enclave and attributed his departure to divine intervention. He attributed his escape from Biafra to two angelic fellows; the popular musician, Roy Chicago and Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, Commander of the Third Marine Commando.

In Chapter Fourteen, the author reflected on the whereabouts of members of The Fractious Pop group. Some are dead, and those that are alive are doing well in their respective callings. The author has since joggled between politics, where he was a member of the PDP’s

National Publicity Committee but currently is a TV political analyst. For Chapter Fifteen, which the author titled, “The Road to Abidjan, Ivory Coast”, he detailed his voyage which led him to the embattled former warlord, General Odumegwu Ojukwu, for an interview who had fled to Abidjan in the dying days of the war. The interview was greeted with widespread readership which landed the author in trouble. He was arrested, a story of how not to gag. For Tony Amadi, he was apologetic that rather than the government hunting him like game, he ought to have been commended for bringing the thoughts of the former Biafran leader to the public arena.

In Chapter Sixteen, the author listed the interview that the embattled Biafran leader granted him in exile. It was titled, “Biafra was Africa in a Pressure Cooker”. Reading through the interview reaffirms that Ojukwu is a cerebral mind whose understanding of the political trajectory should be studied. Some may not agree with his methods but it is doubtful if his brilliance can be questioned. For Chapter Seventeen, the author entitled it, “The Impact of Radio Biafra on the Propaganda War”, doubtless, radio Biafra played a most pivotal role in the struggle for independence of the Republic. From the moment the nation was birth to the end of the secession attempt, the radio was handy in galvanizing the people most spectacularly to the consternation of the Federal Government and troops.

Chapter Eighteen entitled “Biafra Rock Bands Regroup for Concert of the Year”; this was a reminiscence of pop bands that entertained the people of Biafra during the war. The concert was reminiscent of the days of yore for many who attended the show. Tony Amadi’s love for music notwithstanding which inspired the writing of the book was not all about the book as he concludes in Chapter Nineteenth, “The Quest for a New Biafra”, treated the need for the inclusion of people from the South East in the mainstream of events in the country. Like many people from the region. This sentiment is indeed popular with the people of the Eastern part of the country but is rather paradoxical in that the author asserts that “the Igbo people say when a child is crying and pointing to somewhere, whatever is troubling him or her must be located there”.