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“From Historical Facts to Poetic Truths”: The Nigerian Civil War and Other Subjects: An Exploration of Texts and Images in Painting

Tobenna Okwuosa

The postcolonial histories of most African nations are full of tragic experiences caused by brutal civil wars and ethnic conflicts. The struggle for power and control of natural resources is the root cause of the conflicts. Nigeria, the most populous African nation, was engaged in a civil war for thirty months, from 1967–1970, with the people of the Eastern Region seceding from the nation and declaring their region the independent Republic of Biafra under the leadership of the military governor of the region, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The war claimed about 3 million lives and was largely fought in Biafran territory. Most of the casualties were Biafrans and their children, who died of malnutrition. The secession of the Eastern Region from Nigeria was caused by a series of events, including pogroms against the Easterners, particularly the Igbo, after the first military coup attempt (January 15, 1966) in which the Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and the Premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello, were killed. The coup was led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu and other junior officers, most of them Igbo. Chinua Achebe remarked that “by killing Sir Ahmadu Bello, Nzeogwu and the other coup plotters had put themselves on a collision course with the religion, ethnic, and political ramifications of such an action, something they had clearly not thought through sufficiently.”¹ The Igbo military officer, Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who became the head of state after the coup attempt, was killed in a counter coup carried out by Northern officers of mostly Hausa/Fulani extraction, led by Brigadier Murtala Mohammed, on July 29, 1966. Many Igbo officers were killed in the counter coup, and thousands of Igbo civilians—men, women, and children—living in the North, dominated by Hausa/Fulani people, were killed, maimed, and wounded. Their property and houses were looted and destroyed.

On May 30, 1967, Ojukwu, citing a variety of malevolent acts directed at the mainly Igbo Easterners—such as the pogrom that claimed over thirty thousand lives; the federal government’s failure to ensure the safety of Easterners in the presence of organized genocide; and the direct incrimination of the government in the murders of its own citizens—proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria, with the full backing of the Eastern House Constituent Assembly.²

This body of artwork was inspired by the literary works of three major modern Nigerian writers: Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died: Prison Notes*, published in 1972; Chinua Achebe’s *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, published in 2012; and Christopher Okigbo’s *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, published posthumously in 1971. These writers, who were also friends, played specific roles during the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War. Achebe was a roving ambassador for the Biafran government; Okigbo was a field-commissioned Major in the Biafran army; and Soyinka, a Westerner, tried to prevent a full-blown war by going to the Biafran side to meet with the military head of the Biafran government, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, and Brigadier Victor Banjo, a commander in the Biafran army. He also met with Lieutenant Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, an officer in the Nigerian army. Soyinka was accused by the Nigerian government of supporting the secessionists and was held in prison for twenty-two months, most of that time in solitary confinement. Okigbo was killed on the war front by Nigerian forces “in August 1967, in Ekwegbe, close to Nsukka, where his poetry had come to sudden flower seven short years earlier.”³ At his death, Okigbo was considered the finest poet among his contemporaries. His *Path of Thunder*, “poems prophesying war” (1965–67), and such other poems as “The Passage” are what I refer to as “poetic truths.” The “historical facts” are the incidences and experiences recorded in Soyinka’s civil war memoir, *The Man Died*, and Achebe’s personal history of Biafra, *There Was a Country*.

I started producing the paintings that constitute this body of work in 2015 with the ultimate aim of showing them in a solo exhibition in Lagos in 2017 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Republic of Biafra, which existed from 1967–1970, and the 50th

anniversary of the death of Christopher Okigbo. In 2016, I was forced to abandon the project after being away from the studio for a long time due to the sudden death of my father, and the funeral which took four months to plan and execute. Funerals in contemporary Igbo communities are elaborate events that require a significant amount of time and money to organize. In *Celebrating Tragedy: Art and Theatre in the Anatomy of Death and Funeral in Africa*, Krydz Ikwemesi, who sees funeral organizers as curators, states: “The dead is symbolically a subject around which a series of activities revolve; the funeral provides a stage where the activities can take place, an exhibition arena where the performance is enacted.”⁴ My father, Ichie Sir Edwin Anayo Okwuosa, was a 1967 graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He served in the Biafra Food Directorate during the civil war. The painting I was working on when he died in February 2016 became the last painting in this body of work. I produced the five paintings that make up this corpus in one year, 2015–2016.

The opportunity to show this body of work, “From Historical Facts to Poetic Truths,” to the public came when I received an email from Bisi Silva inviting me to participate in the modern and contemporary African arts pavilion that she curated as part of the African Culture and Design Festival (ACDF) held in Lagos in November 2017. In her curatorial essay, “From Here to Eternity,” she writes: “The Modern and Contemporary Section is a kaleidoscopic presentation of artistic and curatorial practice that emanates out of the local but in dialogue with and part of a vibrant, interconnected dynamic international art sector.”⁵

Visual Stories with Texts and Images

I started exploring texts and ideas taken from modern and contemporary Nigerian literature in 2010 in a body of work titled “Cesspit of the Niger Delta.” The twenty acrylic paintings that made up this corpus were inspired by Ogaga Ifowodu’s published poems on the consequences of oil exploration, extraction, and processing on the people of the Niger Delta and their environment. Crude oil, which provides about 90% of Nigeria’s foreign earnings, comes from this region, but the people and their environment have remained largely impoverished and underdeveloped after more than sixty years of oil extraction.⁶ Crude oil was an

important deciding factor in the Nigerian Civil War. The Nigerian government might have left the breakaway republic to exist, but for the Niger Delta oilfields that came under its control.

There are many books and articles on the Nigerian Civil War, but very few artworks focused on it. Obiora Udechukwu is arguably the only artist who has produced a large number of artworks related to the Biafran War. It was this lack of interest in the civil war as a subject among modern and contemporary Nigerian artists that motivated me to work on this project. In addition, I wanted to use it to generate discussions around the war and our collective postcolonial failures and tragedies. Retelling our stories and historical events as much as possible will help us to have a better understanding of where we came from, our present situation, and where we could possibly be in the future. The importance and superiority of a war story over the war itself is noted by “the bearded old man” in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* when he said: “It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.”⁷

With the new waves of agitation for the restoration of the Republic of Biafra by the members and supporters of the Movement for the Actualization of Biafra (MASSOB) founded in 1999 by Ralph Uwazurike, and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) founded by Nnamdi Kanu in 2012, I felt the need to tell the Biafran War story, and to celebrate the poetic work of Christopher Okigbo whose death was described by *The Sunday Times* as “the single most important tragedy of the Nigerian civil war.”⁸



*Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish,
 Beloved homeland of our brave heroes;
 We must defend our lives or we shall perish,
 We shall protect our hearth from all our foes;
 But if the price is death for all we hold dear,
 Then let us die without a shred of fear.*

2016, oil, acrylic, photographs and marker on canvas, 169.5 × 122 cm

This was the painting I was working on when my father died in February 2016. The title is the first stanza of the Biafran national anthem. The major figure in the composition is a Biafran officer ordering an attack; the image is based on a photograph taken by Romano Cagnoni, sourced from Getty Images, an online photo library. Two other photographs from the same resource were incorporated, one showing a group of Biafran soldiers ready to defend their territory against an invading Nigerian force, and the other, a photograph of Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odu-megwu Ojukwu, the leader of the breakaway republic.

The first stanza of the Biafran national anthem is scripted next to the collaged picture of the Biafran soldiers. Some of the texts stenciled on the work include “military zone, keep off” and “force.” A postage stamp celebrating Biafra’s Independence Day, May 30, 1967, is painted at the top right corner, close to an image of the commanding officer. The composition has horizontal sections in four colors: green, black, white, and red. Black and white tiny diagonal lines across the picture field suggest bullets being shot from different directions. The Biafran soldiers, most of whom were not well trained because of the urgency of their service, fought the war with great determination, with many paying the supreme price. The first stanza of the Biafran national anthem captures the love for the nation and the resolute determination to die in its defense: “Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish,/ Beloved homeland of our brave heroes;/ We must defend our lives or we shall perish,/ We shall protect our hearth from all our foes;/ But if the price is death for all we hold dear,/ Then let us die without a shred of fear.” The national anthem, “Land of the Rising Sun,” was based on a poem by Nigeria’s first president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, called “Onitsha Ado N’Idu: Land of the Rising Sun.”



There Was a Country, 2015-16, oil and acrylic on canvas, 169.5 × 122 cm

“There Was a Country,” is the title of Chinua Achebe’s book on the Biafran War that I explored in this project. The imposing image of the Biafran leader, Ojukwu, in this painting, is based on a photograph taken in 1968 when he presented the new Biafran currency and postage stamps. Ojukwu’s posture and stern look give an image of a strong leader. The red background contrasts with the black and white, and echoes the red in the Biafran flag on the table. The flag has three horizontal bands: red, black, and green. The flag, Achebe writes, “was based on the Pan-Africanist teaching of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL).”¹⁰ Achebe further gives the symbolic meanings of the colors in the UNIA-ACL and Biafran flags:

The red in Garvey’s conception highlighted the blood that links all people of African ancestry, as well as blood shed during slavery and liberation struggles around the globe. In the Biafran context it was used to represent blood shed during the pogroms and the quest for independence. The black was seen as the affirmation of “an African nation State” by the UNIA-ACL. In Biafra, it was a symbolic ancestral connection to souls of past years. The green in both Garvey’s and Biafra’s concepts stood for Africa’s abundant natural wealth and resources, and its radiant future. The Biafran flag also highlighted these aspirations with a rising golden sun and rays representing the eleven original provinces in the republic.¹¹

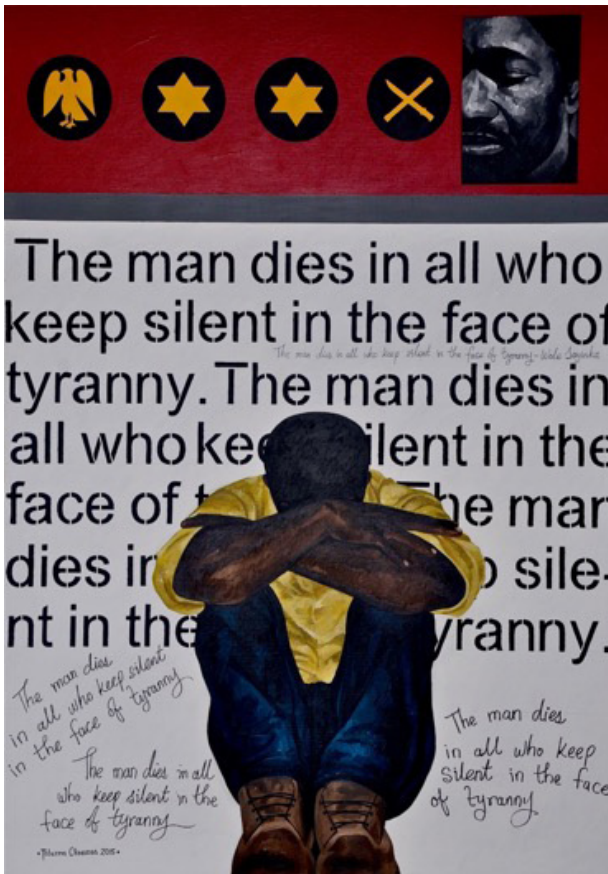


The Man Died, 2015, acrylic, oil and marker on canvas, 122 x 169.5 cm

This work expresses an incident recorded in Wole Soyinka's civil war memoir *The Man Died: Prison Notes*. Soyinka writes: "It seems to me that this really is the social condition of tyranny—the man died, a dog died, the matter is dead. . . . The dog of this immediate death was a journalist, Segun Sowemimo. He was brutally beaten, he and other colleagues, by soldiers on the orders of a Military Governor of the West."¹² Sowemimo's ankle was smashed, and he was treated in three hospitals in Nigeria before he was flown to England, where his leg was amputated. However, before the amputation, the infection in the wound had already affected his lungs. The amputation was "[f]irst, below the knee, then above the knee, then the whole thing—from the socket—was chopped off . . . he was sent back home—as a bad case. He was only six weeks at home when he died."¹³

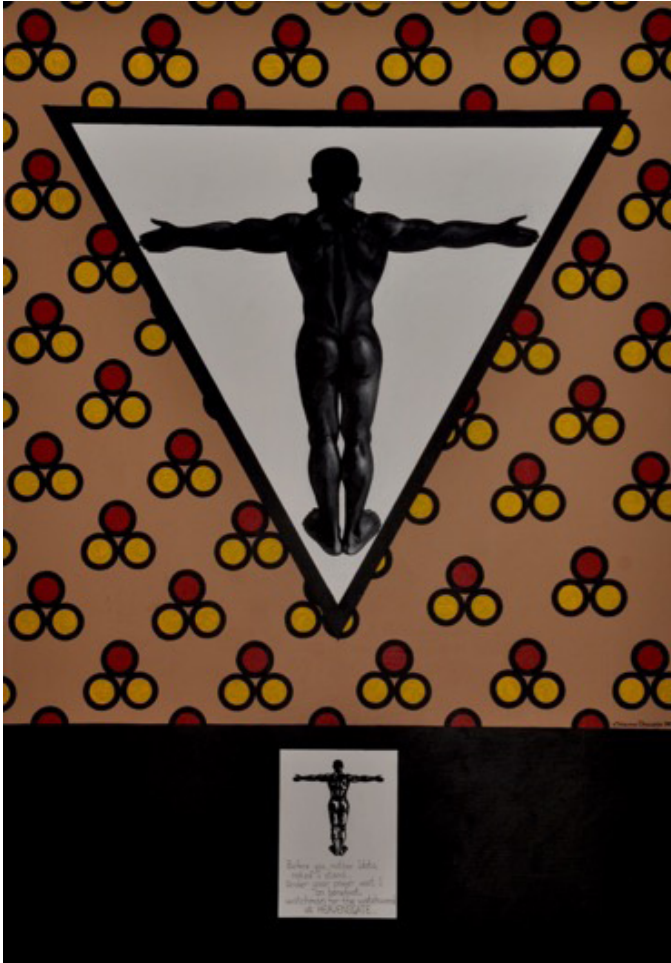
I referenced the well-known postmortem image of Steve Biko who died at the hands of policemen during apartheid in South Africa in portraying the dead body of Segun Sowemimo—a victim of military brutality in Nigeria. The silhouetted face of a soldier in the red background on the left symbolizes an agent of death. The hovering large portrait of Wole Soyinka on the right

seems to be looking at the image of the soldier from the corners of his eyes with much disdain and anger. The yellow background of the work is divided into horizontal sections with black stripes. The composition is dense with scripted and stenciled texts that are taken from the book *The Man Died*. One of the many texts is what the military governor said when he was instructing soldiers to beat up the journalists: “If any of them tries any tricks gun him down.”¹⁴ What became the title of Wole Soyinka’s prison notes, “The Man Died,” was actually a cable reply from someone in Nigeria to whom Soyinka had sent a message from London asking about Segun Sowemimo.



The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny, 2015, acrylic and marker on canvas, 169.5 × 122 cm

This work is about the culture of acquiescence and silence that Wole Soyinka noticed among many Nigerians, particularly the intelligentsia, in the face of tyranny and brutality by military leaders and Nigerian security agents. The quotation, “The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny,” stenciled and written on this work severally is taken from Soyinka’s *The Man Died*. Against the background of the stenciled and written quotation sits a male figure who looks downwards, avoiding eye contact with the viewer. The posture of the male figure, and the closed eye of the face in the upper section of the painting, express silence and acquiescence. The tyrannical military government that Soyinka was confronting at this time, the government of General Yakubu Gowon, is symbolically represented with the rank of a general—a yellow eagle, two stars, and a sword crossed with a torch—enclosed in four black circles at the upper section of the painting. According to Soyinka, Gowon’s “dictatorship has exceeded a thousandfold in brutish arrogance, in repressiveness, in materials corruption and in systemic reversal of all original revolutionary purposes, the worst excesses of the pre-1966 government of civilians.”¹⁵



Before you, mother Idoto, naked I stand...under your power wait I on barefoot, watchman for the watchword at heavensgate..., 2015, acrylic and marker on canvas, 169.5 ×122 cm

This is a visual interpretation of Christopher Okigbo's poem "The Passage," arguably his most popular poem. The title of the work is the first stanza of the poem. Within the expansive light brown background with a repeated three-circle motif, a male nude figure stands with outstretched arms in a white inverted triangle bordered with black. The white triangle symbolizes both the habitat and presence of the water spirit, Idoto, before whom the nude

figure stands. “Cleansing involves total nakedness, a complete self-surrender to the water spirit that nurtures all creation,” writes Okigbo in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*.¹⁶ In the horizontal black band at the lower part of the painting, a small version of the male nude figure is registered in a rectangular space, accompanied by lines from the poem: “Before you mother Idoto, naked I stand . . . Under your power wait I on barefoot, watchman for the watchword at Heavensgate . . .”¹⁷

Notes

¹ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 79.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

³ *Ibid.*, 184. Okigbo was an assistant librarian at the then newly established University of Nigeria, Nsukka, from 1960–62. “At Nsukka, he met a friendly coterie of literati (especially the poets, Peter Thomas, Michael Echeruo, Okogbule Wonodi, and Pol Ndu, and the critics, Sunday Anozie and Donatus Nwoga) whose fellowship helped him to discover his poetic muse (the water goddess of his hometown, Idoto, and other idealized feminine figures in his native Igbo mythology).” Chukwuma Azuonye, “Christopher Okigbo at Work: Towards a Pilot Study and Critical Edition of His Previously Unpublished Poems, 1957-1967,” *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*, paper 5 (2007), 2-3. http://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/5

⁴ C. Krydz Ikwuemesi, *Celebrating Tragedy: Art and Theatre in the Anatomy of Death and Funeral in Africa* (Enugu: The Art Republic, Centre for Arts and Cultural Democracy, 2011), 24.

⁵ Bisi Silva, “From Here to Eternity,” in *This is Africa* (Lagos: Interior Designers Association of Nigeria/Essential Media, 2017), 153.

⁶ See Tobenna Okwuosa, ““Oil is Our Doom”: Photographs of the Niger Delta and Beyond,” *Critical Interventions* 11, no. 2 (2017): 155-70.

⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, (Harlow, Essex: William Heinemann Ltd., 1987), 124.

⁸ This is mentioned in a summary of Obi Nwakanma’s *Christopher Okigbo, 1930–67: Thirsting for Sunlight* published in 2010. <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/8773856>

⁹ Achebe, *There Was a Country*, 152.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1985; originally published by Rex Collings, 1972), 13.

¹³ Ibid., 300.

¹⁴ Ibid., 299.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971), xi. The “Introduction” to *Labyrinths* was written by Okigbo in October 1965. The collection of poems was published posthumously as *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*.

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.