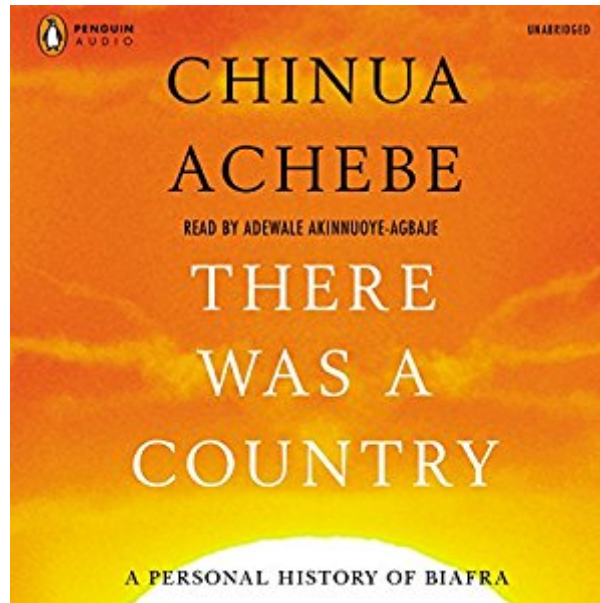


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# There Was A Country: A Personal History Of Biafra



## Synopsis

From the legendary author of *Things Fall Apart* comes a long-awaited memoir about coming of age with a fragile new nation, then watching it torn asunder in a tragic civil war. The defining experience of Chinua Achebe's life was the Nigerian civil war, also known as the Biafran War, of 1967-1970. The conflict was infamous for its savage impact on the Biafran people, Chinua Achebe's people, many of whom were starved to death after the Nigerian government blockaded their borders. By then, Chinua Achebe was already a world-renowned novelist, with a young family to protect. He took the Biafran side in the conflict and served his government as a roving cultural ambassador, from which vantage he absorbed the war's full horror. Immediately after, Achebe took refuge in an academic post in the United States, and for more than 40 years he has maintained a considered silence on the events of those terrible years, addressing them only obliquely through his poetry. Now, decades in the making, comes a towering reckoning with one of modern Africa's most fateful events, from a writer whose words and courage have left an enduring stamp on world literature. Achebe masterfully relates his experience, both as he lived it and how he has come to understand it. He begins his story with Nigeria's birth pangs and the story of his own upbringing as a man and as a writer so that we might come to understand the country's promise, which turned to horror when the hot winds of hatred began to stir. To read *There Was a Country* is to be powerfully reminded that artists have a particular obligation, especially during a time of war. All writers, Achebe argues, should be committed writers - they should speak for their history, their beliefs, and their people. Marrying history and memoir, poetry and prose, *There Was a Country* is a distillation of vivid firsthand observation and 40 years of research and reflection. Wise, humane, and authoritative, it will stand as definitive and reinforce Achebe's place as one of the most vital literary and moral voices of our age. "1966", "Benin Road", "Penalty of Godhead", "Generation Gap", "Biafra, 1969", "A Mother in a Refugee Camp", "The First Shot", "Air Raid", "Mango Seedling", "We Laughed at Him", "Vultures", and "After a War" from *Collected Poems* by Chinua Achebe. Copyright 1971, 1973, 2004 by Chinua Achebe. Used by permission of Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc. and The Wylie Agency, LLC.

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## Customer Reviews

The 1967-1970 Nigerian-Biafran war in which an estimated three million people died, most of them Achebe's Igbo people, was a tragedy. What would have been an additional tragedy was Achebe not providing for the unborn generations his pivotal view of the event, and a sharp cross-examination of the actors. In *There Was A Country*, Achebe does it the Achebe way. In Part one, Achebe reveals the golden days of Nigeria and how through hard work and support from his family he positions himself to receive the baton from exiting colonialists at the dawn of Nigeria's independence. Achebe's story in this regard is the story of how the Igbo, in only 30 years, were able to bridge the educational gap that the people of the then Western Nigeria had as a result of early exposure to Western education. Achebe's early childhood story and path to success mirror the drive that has propelled the Igbo since they became part of Nigeria- a drive that came from Igbo republican society that abhors royalty, encourages competition, and rewards personal achievement. In stories of personal struggle, rugged determination and unique foresight, Achebe makes it known that there is no magic wand behind the Igbo emergence and attainment of preeminent position in the Nigerian project other than by shared industriousness. The consequence of this accomplishment was an immediate fear of Igbo domination. That fear quickly took hold in the psyche of other Nigerians and practically truncated the Nigerian dream of Achebe generation.

In "*There Was A Country*", Chinua Achebe (without mentioning names) described Rep. Chuma Nzeribe and Senator Andy Ubah as "Politicians with plenty of money and very low IQ." The sections of this Achebe's latest book that chronicled the state of decay and corruption in Nigeria to me is a must read not just because it paints a clear picture of how deep our crisis is but that it enables us to start taking steps and actions that will halt and hopefully reverse the decline. So, rather than dwell on Achebe's account of the genocide perpetrated by Gowon and given economic strength and

dimension by Awolowo, which has been universal knowledge just reinforced by Achebe for posterity, I want to focus on something that is happening and what could happen to Anambra State if these "Politicians with plenty of money and very low IQ" are allowed to have their way. It was primarily because of these politicians who Achebe called renegades trying to turn Anambra state into "a bankrupt and lawless fiefdom," that made him (Achebe) reject being among six recipients of Nigeria's second-highest award, the Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic in 2004. These are men with distorted minds and evil in their hearts. They lit series of fires and watched the radio and TV houses began to take a new ugly shape and face as smoke billowed into the early morning sky. The smoke got into their lungs, caused them to cough but delighted their evil heart all the same. On that faithful November morning, we all asked was this real? Tears spilled down our cheeks. We listened and watched without comprehension. We felt a sudden pain behind our breastbone, vulnerable and defeated.

A profoundly important document from one of the world's greatest writers. Here, Professor Achebe is addressing his readership not solely as a novelist, critic, children's author and poet, but as a statesman. The book is broken into four parts - something the writer Obi Nwakanma has cleverly observed also corresponds to the four market days in the Igbo week and a may have provided the super structure for Achebe's literary world view. Nnena Orji also has admirably observed that "It seems...that the insertion of poems in the story is also a throw-back to Igbo traditional narrative styles that emanated from the oral tradition where the story itself was interspersed with chanting, singing and poetry. It occurred to me that Professor Achebe was making a concerted effort to embrace this "authentic African narrative structure" and was not, as some other shallow readings have suggested, just experimenting or taking artistic license. In the western literary tradition, narrative structure followed very strict rules. I think it was G.F.W. Hegel in the 19th century that referred to poetry as "the universal art of the mind [that] runs through all the arts and is art's highest phase, one phase higher than music?"[1] Poetry was treated as an art form apart and was hardly `married with prose." Part one of the book deals with Professor Achebe's family and coming of age. Tender descriptions of his mother and father and their interactions with English clergy are particularly touching. His own education and encounter with some of founders of modern African literature are also found here with luminous beauty.

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