

Yearning to know: A Biafran War Child Reflects on Rwanda

Growing up in the former Republic of Biafra many years after the war ended, the only proof I had that indeed a destructive war was fought were my mother's stories, drawn from memories of the child she was during the war. Adults never discussed Biafra, not even in hushed tones. Local radio and television stations and newspapers filled their slots and pages daily with everything but news or information that bordered on the War. Mother told the sketchy stories only when she had run out of new lion and hare stories. When we begged for a new story, one we had never heard before, she would dust up her war stories, knowing that we were never tired of that.

Mother would tell about the bunker, how her father constructed it, how they would run inside it when the noise of the helicopters that dropped shells filled the air. She talked of how her father covered his prized, shiny corrugated iron sheets with palm frond camouflage. The same short spasms of stories were repeated over and over again to our yearning ears, sometimes with the luxury of some tiny added detail. And sometimes, she sang us those two songs which we had all committed to memory and sang along with her.

I resorted to adding my own made-up details to Mother's war stories as I retold it to friends at school. Friends whose parents lived through the war, but who were never told any war stories. I likewise taught my friends those two war songs that Mother sang, songs about the Red Cross, Kwashiorkor and the victories of the Biafran army.

We craved for more songs, but Mother had none. We craved for more stories, but the mind of the child she was during the War

could only hold as little. We turned to Father, but it seemed he had nothing to say to us about the Nigerian-Biafran war, though quite strange for someone who was in his late teens when the war raged. Once while we were in the village during Christmas, he entered his room and brought out an iron box full of bank notes. Biafran money, he told us, followed by a short, hesitantly told story of how he engaged in the risky business of crossing enemy lines to trade in salt. Delighted, we surrounded him for more stories, but Dad would hurriedly, almost apologetically, pack the box, lock it firmly, carry it back to the locked closet in his room and commence to dress up for a town hall meeting. The entire family would be locked up by the authorities, if we as much as told anyone about the bank notes, Dad warned us sternly as he made his exit.

I turned to the only hope of a child deprived of information by determined parents – my teachers, my books. There, a worse silence awaited me. The teachers had no information to offer, did not talk about the War, did not teach the history of the War. The children books I had access to held no information about the War.

Was there a death sentence hanging over the head of anyone who talked about the war? Or perhaps could it be that the pain was too much to relive? Or did it have to do with the therapy of healing by forgetting? I asked unanswered questions.

In my late teens, I began to search for and to read books on the War; but such books were hard to find, the ones I saw were often long reads and proved difficult to understand.

Decades later, as an adult living in a Rwanda that suffered genocide about two decades before my sojourn in that land, a different story awaited me. I watched several times as my friend patiently responded to her 7 year old's questions as they both watched television programs on the genocide. I participated in several remembrance events where survivors were brought to give eyewitness accounts. I visited the

numerous, well-maintained memorial sites spread throughout Rwanda; churches where thousands of victims were hacked, shot and smoked to death and schools where refugees were ambushed and had grenades thrown at them.

Between April and June each year, public and private institutions and organizations took time out to remember the genocide in different ways. Genocide widows and orphans would receive gifts and donations, large billboards of major corporations such as MTN, Airtel, Ecobank and others would bear adverts to reflect the mourning period, neighbours greeted one another with declarations of peace, and communities would organize events and town hall meetings. At the core of the remembering is to convey the message that such must never be allowed to happen again in Rwanda.

Meanwhile, questions continued to rage in my mind about the conflict that occurred in my own nation.

I talked with many Rwandans and discovered that opinions were divided about Kwibuka, the annual genocide remembrance events. Many wholly support the idea of the remembrance; "If we forget, we repeat," they say. But for some, Kwibuka should be scrapped; "it brings back evil memories," some say, "It is now too politicized," others contend.

I took sides with those who favored a remembrance. Not because I have been to the Holocaust museum in Washington D.C., and the Jewish synagogue in Budapest and seen how elaborate and intentional groups are in trying to memorialize, reclaim truth, integrity, and honor, and work to avoid a repetition. No. I took sides because I felt that by so doing, I could make up for the void I feel about my own people's refusal to remember Biafra. I took sides because I yearned to know what really happened, what led to the war, if it could have been avoided and what effects the war has had on the state of the Nigerian nation today.

My wanting to know about the Biafran War is not so I can relive victimhood, lay blame on everyone else but my ethnic group, or incite a second rebellion against the Nigerian state. What informed my search for knowledge about Biafra as a child still informs that search today as an adult, and that is the need to know, in order to heal, to advance, to restructure, to reconstruct and most importantly, to avoid a repeat of history.