

Welcome to my inaugural column. The Monday issue of the *Vanguard* has long been my favorite because of the *Treena Kwenta* page of which I am a devoted fan. In my opinion, it is the finest popular literature in the Nigerian print media. Its appeal is heightened by the mystery over the identity of the author of *Treena Kwenta*... one of the few real secrets in the media/literary world in Nigeria.

Monday may not be the most popular day of the week because it marks a return to work after the weekend break, but it is probably the most challenging day for that same reason. I hope to challenge you, the reader, on Mondays:

“On Monday when the sun is hot

I wonder to myself a lot

Now is it true or is it not

That what is which and

which is what?”

(Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne, 1926).

On Mondays, I too shall wonder at the complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes of life in Nigeria from the perspective of an outsider (from down under) who has lived and worked inside Nigeria for 35 years—thus the title of the column.

This inaugural Monday is a special one. At the Jewish Passover celebration, a child asks: “Why is this day different from all other days?” Why this Monday is different from all other Mondays is that it is the 15th of January. This is a very important date in Nigerian history. This year, it marks the 35th anniversary of the first military coup, which toppled the First Republic, and the 31st anniversary of the end of the Nigerian Civil War which was the fallout from the coup: More of that anon.

To complete my self-introduction to you, dear readers, albeit unnecessarily, I am of the female gender. This fact influences my thinking and worldview just as much as nationality, culture, and class. Gender is a universal differentiation, which affects all spheres of life: personal, domestic, political, economic, and corporate. It was a major issue in colonialism which was recognized indirectly by the West African Students Union in the UK in 1945 which resolved: “On independence, there should be erected two monuments in gold raised to the eternal honor and memory of (a) the white women of Europe for making our stay in Europe possible, (b) the Almighty mosquitoes for saving our lands from the settlement of colonial usurpers.”

Actually, Nigeria as a nation-state has far too few historical monuments honoring its founders. Apart from statues of Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awolowo, Tai Solarin, and Okpara, there are no fitting physical monuments to honor Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (the grandiose, ugly square in Lagos which bears his name is not an appropriate memorial). Nor to Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto; Festus Okotie-Eboh, and S.L. Akintola, the victims of January 15, 1966. There is still no national monument to honor the dead of the civil war, on both sides, civilian and military. Other nations have recently experimented with new, bold, war memorials which convey stark messages about the horror of war. Within Nigeria, some cultures pay great attention to the death of individuals through elaborate and expensive funeral rites, yet the nation disregards its collective dead.

## Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



# Going back in history

Many of those who died in the civil war have not even been identified. Since there has not been an accurate and acceptable census of the living since 1951, it is not surprising that there are no accurate records of deaths during the war.

The respected journalist, John de St. Jorre, estimated between half and one million dead but noted “there are no official figures” and since accurate records are not kept by either side, a reliable estimate of casualties may never emerge. My figure is a consensus of informed opinion and I feel that something around 600,000 - for total deaths-

conomic disempowerment of the Igbo. For this, the Ohaneze petition demands “reparations and appropriate restitution.”

So, the civil war of 31 years ago will be re-interpreted in 2001 at the Oputa panel. The issue of reparations and restitution has already been raised in respect of all the victims (and their families) and the atrocities committed by the Abacha regime. I agree with all the commentators who lament the incapacity of the Oputa panel to provide justice by prosecuting those guilty of torture (physical and psychological), murder, assassinations, and innumerable other abuses of

reminds me of Stalin.

Stalin was the totalitarian ruler of the USSR from 1927 to 1953. In that time, millions of Russians were killed by the secret police, NKVD, including many of Stalin's close colleagues and members of his family. Stalin confided in one of his colleagues who survived to tell that “to choose one's victims, to prepare one's plans minutely, to stake an implacable vengeance and then to go to bed.... there is nothing sweeter in the world.” Like Abacha, Stalin died in his bedroom at night under mysterious circumstances. The head of the NKVD discovered the body but pretended Stalin was sleeping off a drunken binge for two days while he ran around and informed some of his colleagues. The soldiers on duty at Stalin's residence at the time were either transferred to Siberia or just disappeared. Eventually, Khrushchev emerged as the new ruler and immediately executed Beria, the head of the NKVD.

All nations have suffered under brutal leaders and experienced terrible violence and bloodshed. In many, the past is not safely dead, it carries knives. It is imperative to learn from past disasters and not continue to repeat them. Next Monday, I shall have more to say on Babatope's interpretation of the Abacha era.

To end on a lighter note, since we are still close to the Christmas period, I was quite taken by an advertisement which you must have noticed in the papers a couple of weeks before Christmas. It describes the three ages of man (sic): First, you believe in Father Christmas, second, you do not believe in Father Christmas, third you are a Father Christmas. Disregarding the inherent gender and religious discrimination, I enjoyed the wry humor and feel how appropriate its wider message is for many Nigerians who, if they have been reasonably successful, have to play Father Christmas to their extended families, villages, and towns. The burden can be very onerous, especially in these straightened times. When it is no longer possible to satisfy the expectations of those who look to you for largesse, you have entered the fourth age of man: You hand the job over to your grown-up children.

Now, is that true or is it not? That what is which and which is what.

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may be nearer the mark.” (St. Jorre. *The Nigerian Civil War 1972*). The Ohaneze petition to the Oputa panel estimates that over one million people died during the war.

Now that it is thirty-one years since the end of the war, the embargo on federal and state governments' records of the war must have been lifted. This should expand the data already held at the National Archives, Enugu, and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In the meantime, our knowledge of the civil war has been greatly enriched by the inspiring, heroic investigation of Emma Okocha into the Mid-West sector. His important book, *Blood on the Niger (1994)*, documents the atrocities committed by the Federal troops against the Mid-West Igbos and identifies the hundreds of individuals who were killed in Asaba.

It is such data that has led the Ohaneze to claim in its petitions that “Nigeria's prosecution of the war violated all aspects of the Geneva Convention.” The petition reads further: “It interprets the massacres of Igbos (overlooking that many non-Igbo Easterners were also victimized) in 1966 and the marginalization of the Igbos after the war up to date, as evidence of political, social, and eco-

human rights. I also fully identify with Soyinka's lament about the inappropriate responses of some members of the audience and media to Mustapha's vain-glorious obscene posturing.

My response to the proceedings of the panel is to see it from a historical and comparative perspective. The German philosopher, Hannah Arendt, analyzed totalitarianism and its leaders. In all cases, the leaders succeeded because of the willing cooperation and support of a significant part of the population.

The leaders may be psychopaths (Hitler, Goebbels, and Stalin) but the disciples and administrators of the totalitarian system of mass extermination were normal, so ‘normal’ as to merit the description ‘banal.’ Hence Arendt coined the term, “the banality of evil.” Abacha was a psychopath, but he was able to exercise his evil authoritarianism because of the complicity of some banal civil servants, academics, security operatives, police officers, politicians, and armed forces officers. Their testimony at the panel and in publications reveals their variety of self-serving motives. The way Abacha made a fool of all of them and encouraged the security forces to run wild, sometimes fighting each other,