

PRESIDENT Obasanjo is quoted as saying during his recent official visit to Bayelsa State

...If Biafra had won, I would have been dead, your governor would not have been in the position he is today.....” (Guardian March 17, 2001.)

I am intrigued by this speculation for two reasons; it reveals the President’s awareness of the value of asking **what if** of the past. In an article under that title (in the *Sunday Vanguard*, October 31, 1999), I wrote about

Counterfactual history – they might have been and what-ifs-- predicated on the assumption that the understanding of history can be greatly enhanced by changing a significant fact and examining other outcomes. This can lead historians to question long-held assumptions and show that there are no certain outcomes.

For instance - what if the American-Indians had defeated the white Americans in the Indian wars?

I went on to relate **what-ifs** to Nigeria’s history and asked a question very similar to President Obasanjo’s. “What if the Banjo-led Biafran army had exploited the unpreparedness of the Nigerian army and moved to Lagos and Ibadan from Ore in September 1967? Would the North then have seceded as it had wanted to do in July 1966 and Southern Nigeria become Biafra, led by Ojukwu? How would the North have developed without oil and access to the sea? Would it not have become more like Niger? For how long would Biafra have tolerated military rule? On the other hand, **what if**, during the civil war, certain Nigerian junior army officers such as Idiagbon, Babangida, Buhari, and Abacha had been killed in battle? Would there still have been the 1985 coup?”

The second reason I find the President’s speculation intriguing has to do with the nature of the Nigerian civil war. There are three ways in which a commanding officer on either side of the civil war could have died. First, by accident/natural causes aggravated by the harsh environment; second, in actual combat, thirdly by execution, with or without a court-martial. There were examples of such deaths of top officers in the war, but as in many wars, the mortality rate of commanders was much lower than that of the other ranks. At the end of the war, most of the commanding officers on both sides survived and the Nigerian armed force did not execute any of the former Biafran military leaders. Some were detained for up to five years but I am not aware that any died in detention.

So, how might Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo as G.O.C. 3, Marine Commando Division have died if Biafra won the war? He might have died in combat, heroically, refusing to escape when the Biafran forces overran his troops. Obasanjo’s immense courage in the Congo and civil war is legendary. If he had retreated into the creeks of the Niger Delta to lead guerilla resistance, he might have died from exposure to the unhealthy swamp conditions. Or, is Obasanjo implying that the victorious Biafrans would have executed the Nigerian commanding officer? In his memoirs of the war *My Command* (Ibadan Heinemann 1980), Obasanjo describes poignantly the way the Biafran commanders, his former military colleagues and subordinates, received him.

For Ojukwu, the one Biafran General whom the Nigerians might have considered for execution, Obasanjo was determined to protect him.

“I had given serious thought to how to handle him, (Ojukwu) if he was captured alive – to prevent any mishap caused by our soldiers. I had no fear of Ojukwu committing suicide. I knew only too well he was not such a man. (118)”

Nor can one conceive of Obasanjo ever contemplating suicide under even the most grueling conditions. All in all, I consider it unlikely that the defeated Nigerian commanding officers would have been executed. So, one may question whether it was inevitable that Colonel Obasanjo would have died if Biafra had won the war. I speculate that once

Nina’ Mba’s **Insider / Outsider’s** **Account**



The many What ifs of Nigerian history

the territory of Biafra had been secured and Nigeria recognized its sovereignty, all the detained Nigerian officers and Nigerian prisoners of war would have been returned to Nigeria, which in turn would have been peacefully split into two separate nations. Obasanjo might have ended up as the president and commander-in-chief of the Oduduwa Republic! After serving one term establishing the new nation, Obasanjo might have become the first African Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Recollections of the Nigerian civil war and the role played by the top military play-

‘What if, during the civil war, certain Nigerian junior army officers such as Idiagbon, Babangida, Buhari, and Abacha had been killed in battle? Would there still have been the 1983 and 1985 coups?’

ers have been stimulated by the just-published *The Hurricane: General Murtala Mohammed*, written by Taiwo Ogundipe and published by Top Seal Communications (no location given), in 2001. The foreword is by President Obasanjo who welcomes a book about his friend and a close colleague and praises it as “a good research work.” There is no doubt that a well-researched, critical and analytical biography of Murtala Mohammed is most necessary and indeed overdue, but this book is far from being that.

Just as Obasanjo toys with counterfactual history, Ogundipe, a journalist, experiments with another historical methodology of trying to enter the consciousness of the history maker to comprehend the motivation, thinking, and behavior of the individual. However, the individual’s role is then situated in the context of the prevailing impersonal historical conditions. Ogundipe’s attempts at capturing the stream of consciousness of Mohammed, Gowon, Bisalla, and Dimka are laudable but not backed by any analysis of the historical context or any solid research.

Ogundipe is not a historian, but journalists and historians have methodologies in common. Sources are just as important for journalists as they are for historians. Except where the safety of the source may be at stake, the acknowledgement and identification of the sources used in constructing a story, an article or a book are essential. That is the only way the reader can determine the integrity and accuracy of the information. The author’s credibility is predicated on the responsible use of well-researched sources in the written work.

Ogundipe neither acknowledges nor identifies any of his sources or references. There is no proper table of contents, no bibliography. Ogundipe is presumably familiar with the literature of the civil war/coups but no citation is given even where he quotes verbatim from published works.

The dedication of the book, “to the memory of General Murtala Mohammed and all those who lost their lives in the service of the nation” immediately proclaims the author’s bias. Less than half of the book of 267 pages is about the coup in which he and Colonel Taiwo and their staff were assassinated and attempts made to assassinate Obasanjo and Danjuma. The author lavishes a lot of space on Dimka, the executor of the coup, focusing on his affairs, his steady girlfriend, his drinking, and partying. The cover blurb informs us that the author has scripted several soap operas and that’s exactly what the coverage of Dimka read like!

The assessment of Mohammed is very positive: the only criticisms are those made by General Bisalla when Ogundipe reconstructs Bisalla’s thinking about Mohammed thus “..... headstrong ... extremely reckless ... the miscalculation at the war front the many lives that were lost as a result of what he considered Mohammed’s reckless moves.” (81)

In discussing the Onitsha campaign, Ogundipe baldly states, “His troops suffered heavy casualties in the process, and he was roundly criticized ... This it was believed in some quarters saved Nigeria three or more extra years of war.” (36) There is no reference at all to the atrocities committed in Igbo-speaking areas of the Mid-West during Mohammed’s advance to Onitsha, despite their documentation in ‘Blood on the Niger’ by Emma Okocha with which Ogundipe ought to be familiar.

Certainly, there is evidence of Ogundipe’s familiarity with some of the literature on the civil war because he quotes almost verbatim, but without acknowledgement, for instance, some paragraphs from Obasanjo’s books *My Command* and *Not My Will* (University Press Limited Ibadan 1990). For example, Ogundipe refers to him accepting the position of the head of state after Mohammed was assassinated. “He finally had to succumb when he was pointedly told that his unyielding attitude was going to create confusion and instability which could be exploited by Dimka and his cohorts to see their dream through to reality (221).

Ogundipe alleges that “to prevent Gowon ruining everything they had fought for, Mohammed suggested to some of his colleagues at the battlefield to slow down the pace of ending the war to force Gowon to mend his ways. Obasanjo argues that too much effort, men and materials had been put into the war for anyone to start calling for a delay in ending it.” (51)

What if Mohammed had succeeded in slowing down the pace and the war had dragged on? France would likely have recognized Biafra and sent in enough men and arms to turn the tide of the war. Then Obasanjo might well have been caught inside a victorious Biafra!