

Tale of Two Vultures is completely changed when 'impaled on the moon/a boy's head is banging for justice' is turned into 'impaled by the moon/he bangs a boy's head, demanding justice'. The 'he' referred to can only be the 'gongbearer' introduced in verse 1 part 11 of the poem which does not make sense in this context. Nearly embarrassing is the quotation from stanza iv of *Naked Testimonies* that is also printed on the cover page: 'it is I/Striding upon my high places/Shield my voice/I walk in fire' the penultimate line is turned into 'my voice my shield'. Here the meaning of the line is changed from a voice that needs to be protected to a weapon that protects.

Also notable are inaccuracies in the punctuation through which certain phrases are

grouped together where they should not (for example in *Answer Back*).

Altogether it can be said that it is very laudable to make Adewale's impressive collection available for a readership that is not firm enough in English to read an exclusively English edition. However, it must be stated - and this is valid for basically all translations - that the translation should only serve as a guide and if possible, should be compared with the original. It is also unfortunate that this carefully produced book is basically only distributed in Germany. It would be desirable for the author that this fine collection of poetry and short stories be accessible to a wider readership.

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Commitment to biography

BY NINA MBA

Chuks Iloegbunam, IRONSIDE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF GENERAL AGUIYI-IRONSI, NIGERIA'S FIRST MILITARY HEAD OF STATE, Press Alliance Network Limited, London, 1999, 250pp

NEITHER in the biography nor at the launch of the book in Lagos on October 28, 1999 was any explanation given as to the meaning of the title of the book or when/how Ironsi was bestowed with the title *Ironside*, although there were many references to it and to the word 'warlord' at the launch. 'Ironside' was not created as a nickname for Ironsi. It is a word of ancient lineage in England (and in English). In 1642 when the English parliament and King Charles I were at war, Oliver Cromwell a devout Puritan and parliamentarian organised a new and more effective military force. This army imbued with strict discipline, high morale, religious fervour and advanced democratic ideas came to be known as the 'Ironsides' and played a significant role in the victory of the parliamentary force (known as the Roundheads). However when parliament hesitated to execute the

King, Cromwell (also known as Ironside) turned on parliament, divided it and it was the Rump of that parliament which executed King Charles in 1649. England then became a republic known as the Commonwealth and Cromwell ruled it as a dictator as the Lord Protector until he died in 1658. In 1660 Charles II was restored and sometime early next century the UK may expect the ascension of Charles III.

One may speculate on certain interesting ironies in attaching Ironsides to General Aguiyi Ironsi (for instance, it was the rump of the Nigerian parliament which 'handed over' the government to Ironsi and the January 1966 coup leaders did possess a moral fervour and advanced ideas akin to the original Ironsides but the point is simply that the reader is entitled to that information. Pini Jason, the reviewer of the biography at the

<< launch, describes the title as a fitting nickname, then asks: Why would a man often described in the most disparaging way be given such a flattering nickname. Who but a brave soldier deserves such adulatory nickname (Sunday Vanguard, October 31 1999). Knowing the history of the word, 'Ironsides' makes it even more adulatory.

Most of the attention paid to the biography so far, both at the launch and in the review has focused on the subject of the book and his role in Nigerian history rather than on the way the biography has presented Ironsi. This review concentrates more on the

eleven years of his life to see the book through and that he is now a very fulfilled man. (Oriono, This Day November 7 1999). In the Preface the author states his objective in writing 'a biography'.

A biography that would determine the reason behind the shabby treatment to which Ironsi's memory had for too long been subjected.

In other words Iloegbunam set out to revise the accepted historiography of Ironsi: the inherent dangers of this approach are noted by Pini Jason, who reviewed the book at the launch. 'Naturally being a work of reconstructive history Ironside was blind to the fact that General Ironsi was a human being and could be allowed a few lapses. The General came off here as an immaculate saint' (Sunday Vanguard October 31 1999). General Ironsi's two hundred days to eternity have been viewed critically, in the historiography (examined exhaustively by the author). One sympathises with Iloegbunam's sense of mission particularly since, as he pointed out - no one (else) had written a book about Ironsi and - no one (had) questioned the fact that comments on him have continued to be deprecatory (xi). Iloegbunam's impassioned defence extends to his laying down the law on the use of 'Ndigbo' (Igbo People), 'all other forms of reference to the Igbo other than these are not countenanced in this work, even if in quoted material' (xv). In so doing the author breaks the law of scholarship that quotes must be exactly as in the original.

Iloegbunam's defence of Ironsi traps him into an unnecessarily aggressive, indeed at times rude and personalised attacks on those who assess Ironsi critically e.g 'sort of derived', 'those who know other than (sic) the contents of these two chapters, not rumour peddlers and revisionists, are challenged to controvert them.'

Iloegbunam sharply criticises Clark and Elaigwu the two biographers of General Yakubu Gowon and Lyndsay Barrett, the biographer of General Theophilus Danjuma, over a number of issues. These are mostly substantial but occasionally spiteful, as in Elaigwu believed that in writing the biography of Gowon, the eponym would not attain a larger than life stature unless no stone was left unturned in denigrating Ironsi (115)

Although generally the narrative flows, there are too many passages of clumsy, careless and convoluted prose and too many instances of shoddy journalese. A few examples to justify my criticism: most people did not at all appreciate that the nation was close to an even greater calamity from which only divine providence could introduce an obviation. (12) When Ironsi moved forward by one



Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi. Former Head of the National Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Courtesy of the United Nations

biography.

A passionate commitment to one's work is necessary for a biographer especially when faced with problems concerning source materials. But a declared passionate commitment to the subject of one's work undermines its credibility. This biography was a personal mission for the author. At the launch, Iloegbunam informed us that he had spent about N1 million of his personal funds and

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hour the reception for traditional rulers at Mapo Hall, Ibadan on 14 January 1966. Sanni Bello his ADC 'now thinks it was perhaps - slight foreboding of the contingency of his imminent demise' (134). And Ironsi and Fajuyi would see the sun up on the following morning but not another sun down.

After describing graphically the horrific beating of Ironsi and Fajuyi en route to their execution, Iloegbunam concludes in anticlimatic facetiousness. 'It was that sort of day. Earlier, in government house, Major T. Y. Danjuma accosted Ironsi on the stair case... any hand that went up before Ironsi then did not do so in salutation but was like the racket (sic) of Wimbledon' (141)

Chapter 10, entitled *Just Before The Turmoil* is only seven pages but four are taken up describing two significant events - which speak volumes on his nature - on how (Ironsi) related to others (74); the reader wades through a rambling account of Ironsi's visit to the Sultan of Sokoto's hospital bed in London and a reception organised for him by Dr. J. O. Okezie in Umuahia. This reader was left with the sneaking suspicion that the author just did not want to waste this hard-won information!

That is followed by the sweeping unsubstantiated judgement that - the political party, NPC (Northern Peoples Congress) took the position that Ironsi's tenure as GOC (General officer Commanding) had to be terminated so that a tested political ally would take his place - to effectively react to the specificity (sic) of the anarchic situation in the West (78 - 9). Another sweeping, undocumented statement by Iloegbunam on page 93 is 'No other Nigerian head of state has equaled this record of fairness and balance in the distribution of public appointments'.

Chapter 13: 'The Crash of the Elephant' narrates dramatically the arrest, beating and execution of Ironsi and Fajuyi. It documents the painful betrayals of Fajuyi by his ADC, Lt. Umar and of Ironsi by Lt William Walbe, the commander of the GOC's security convoy, the courage of Colonel Hilary Njoku and ADC Nwankwo but leaves unanswered the exact role of ADC Sanni Bello.

Chapter 15: 'The Pogrom' documents in awful detail the killings of July 29 and the pogroms of May and September 1966. It exposes Governor Hassan Katsina's refusal to use troops to stop massacres whereas Col. Shuwa's bravery and initiative in using his troops saved many lives in Kano. It notes Dr. Iyorchia Ayu's allegation that Aminu Kano was personally involved in anti-Ironsi and anti-Igbo propaganda and attacks and cites Gambia Sawaha's evidence to confirm this charge.

Iloegbunam quotes Gowon's speech of September 29, 1966. 'it appears that the killing of Igbo's is going beyond reason and it is NOW (this writer's emphasis) at a point of recklessness and irresponsibility' but fails to comment on the irony inherent in the use of 'now'.

Iloegbunam's biography does not end with Ironsi's death. The post-humous account narrates how Colonel Adebayo retrieved the corpses of Ironsi and Fajuyi and accorded them a proper burial in Ibadan cemetery. Bizarrely the deaths were not officially announced until at the Aburi meeting in January 1967. 'Ojukwu said he did not recognise Gowon as the Supreme Commander because in the absence of an explanation on the fate of Ironsi, no one could succeed him. It was at this stage that the military leader agreed to announce Ironsi's death' (187). On January 20, 1967 Ironsi was reburied in his home town, Umuahia.

Gowon never agreed to see Ironsi's widow, although he had frequently enjoyed her hospitality when both he and Ironsi were in London but Murtala Mohammed did and provided some assistance in form of scholarships for a couple of the eight children. Babangida named the army barracks in Abuja after Ironsi and in his last day in office, made Ironsi G.C.E.R.. That is where the biography should end, for the last chapter of the book is irrelevant to the biography, since it expresses the author's views on politics after Abacha and reprints an article he wrote in February 1991 and an article in the magazine Tell.

The major strength of Ironside is the author's uncovering of invaluable source material. Ifeajuna's unpublished manuscript appears in print, in excerpts for the first time. The Camerounian, Hans A. Anagho, then a Colonel in the Nigerian army who helped Ironsi put down the January 15 'munity' was interviewed, for the first time. Iloegbunam achieved a real scoop in his interviewing of General Welby Everand which should put an end to previous uninformed speculation as to who he selected among the contenders for the place of the first Nigerian GOC (Brigadier Ogundipe). Another scoop was interviewing several of the Austrians held hostage in the Congo whom Ironsi personally rescued for which heroism he was awarded an Austrian honour. Interview with Ironsi's ADCs, especially Andrew Nwankwo with Peter Enahoro, Dr. J. O. Okezie, G. C. Onyike, Attorney-General Hamzat Ahmadu, then Ironsi's private secretary, and Ambassadors Ogunsulire and Jolaoso also provide a wealth of previously little known information and analysis. The then secretary to the federal

<< government, S. O. Wey, was interviewed and his valuable recollections appear in print for the first time. Alhaji Abdul Razak, who recorded the minutes of the meeting between Ironsi and the rump of the government was interviewed. Iloegbunam used the U.K. Public Records Office and examined the minutes of the British cabinet meeting of August 2 1966 which confirm that the U.K. High Commissioner and the U.S. ambassador persuaded Gowon not to announce the secession of the Northern region in his first broadcast as head of state. Professor Ben Enwonwu, a childhood friend of Ironsi, provides illuminating recol-

lections. The author also made good use of West Africa magazine, always a useful primary source. All the above, in addition to many other interviews and a most comprehensive use of secondary sources result in a thorough research biography which will in turn become a valuable source material for historians, political scientists and biographers.

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Promising leaves

BY MARK OZAVESE AFADAMA

Bunmi Oyinsan (ed) TREMBLING LEAVES (AN ANA LAGOS ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES), Oracle Books, Lagos, 1999, 112pp.

PROSPECTIVE or budding writers share a similar aspiration: to be accepted as worthy of publication and thus uplifted from a state of being unknown to the known. And for many a prospective fiction writer, the genre of the short story may well be the veritable testing ground of seminal expression, a stepping stone and a launch pad to greater artistic accomplishment.

This view probably underlines the commitment of the Association of Nigerian Authors (Lagos State chapter) to a programme of consistent discovery or promotion of new literary talents in the Nigerian literary context. Its most recent achievement in this regard is the publication of this anthology of short stories.

The book parades a crop of new male and female writers and offers thereby a compendium of individual perspectives linguistic capabilities and idiosyncrasies that confirm once again that there are clearly inexhaustible resources existing for literary sustainability in the Nigerian milieu.

The writers may well be the 'trembling leaves' in a sense of being tentative and unpractised sojourners on a universally vast and, in very many areas, distinguished literary terrain. And then in the sense of being long-suffering victims of a malignant socio-political order. The themes of the anthology are thus of destruction and desolation (which is physical, psychical, personal and collective); poverty and the ways of escaping from it; moral laxity and ineptitude in matters of sex, love and relationships; rape and sexual harassment of women; alienation

and exile instigated by military dictatorship; and of course, recrimination and the prospects of societal renewal following the era of the collapse of military destructiveness and the subsequent embrace and enthronement of democracy.

In most of the stories, these thematic revelations are conveyed through refreshing narrative methods. These methods encapsulate unique stylistic perspectives and a general technical initiative and depth: qualities which incontestably define a substantial literature.

'Age Of Iron' by Tony Kan-Onwordi which sets the tone and texture of the other stories is flamboyant in view of its very poetic outlook. The psychical disposition of the narrator is principally of disappointment and rage over a torturing social reality. He walks 'stopping under the burden of truth and prophecy, through these streets, reeking with pain and rage.' (p.11). He is the poet-prophet and watchman who notes 'the sights, the smells and sounds... the tired, cracked streets... old men silhouetted in doorways like cursed fig trees... children with spindly legs and wild eyes.' (p.9). But he also soberly notes that 'it was not always so with us. We had a past that was rich... the wealth our soil and sea brought us... soldiers with pot bellies and politicians in flowing gowns conspired in their greed to impoverish us' (p10). Demoralised and alienated by all the drought and darkness in the land, the option of exile becomes inevitable: 'the journey from this land of my birth, bearing with me the sacred seeds of hope and renewal' (p.13).

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