

A Testimony of God's Supremacy

Title of Book: *Born To Live: from the Child of the gods to a Child of God*

Author: Raymond Tom Oyil

Publisher: High Calling Publishers, 4, Ndashi Street, D/Line, Port Harcourt.

Pages: 220

Reviewer: Goodluck Uwaks Miwari

I think it is quite appropriate to start this review from the cover page of the book. The title of the book is embossed in bold white letters on blue background and superimposed on a photograph of the author. The embossment and the colour-combination are a great plus on the aesthetic quality of the book. The author, donning a typical Riversman's attire and wearing a tooth-paste smile, bubbles with vitality without being easily given out as a sexagenarian, full of life and born to live indeed!

Written in a didactic and narrative style, the purpose of *Born to Live* is to let the reader see, through the life of the author, Raymond Tom Oyil, God's almightiness and supremacy in the affairs of man. It showcases, as exemplified in the life of the author, God's abundant love, infinite mercies, unbounded kindness and countless blessings for all of us, in spite of our carnality and prodigality.

Although it is an autobiography or a personal memoir and an account of the author's life at 60 years of age which is expected to focus mainly on the facts, experiences and circumstances of his private life, *Born to Live* naturally and unavoidably expresses the author's thoughts on a variety of societal and topical issues.

In the introduction, Raymond emphasizes the importance of a writing and reading culture to "keep people well informed and less inclined to violence and communal clashes as land boundaries, succession practices and procedures about royal or chieftaincy stools are documented, preserved and respected as much as possible without recourse to unnecessary and avoidable rancour, violence and loss of lives and property." The reader of *Born to Live* is bound to appreciate the fact that the habit of writing and reading generates and provides information and that information is knowledge and knowledge is power. A passionate reader of *Born to Live* will see the author as a possessor of a good amount of pen-power, having formed the habit of reading and writing at an early age.

Raymond says, in the Preface, that unlike today's children, he was "just pushed out from the womb on to a plantain leaf laid on the floor" of his "parents' mud-and-thatch house to battle with and get inured to the germs." This description of his birth encapsulates the story-line of *Born to Live* which is a depiction of our struggle to live, from the day we are born to the day we die.

Although the author did not completely escape from the temptation of self-adulation which is common in autobiographies, he exhibits "remarkable frankness" as acknowledged in the Foreword written by Kombo Mason Braide (Ph.D), the author's former boss in the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). In an age when people, in most cases, make false declarations about almost every aspect of their lives, particularly about their age, in order to stay put in public service or gain other social and economic benefits, it takes such plain speaking and frankness such as shown by the author, to place one's date of birth and other biodata in a book for public consumption. Perhaps our much desired and talked about transparency and accountability would be easier to attain, if we learnt not to be economical with facts about our lives.

Early chapters of the book cover the author's birth genealogies, ethnic roots, role players and models, the supportive roles of family members as well as the socio-economic conditions and religious beliefs of his people at the time of his birth and early childhood. His narrative of his parental and ancestral roots is a good lesson on how poverty can be an impelling force, rather than a demotivation to self-improvement and education. His ability to rise above his humble and poor origins in spite of great obstacles is a lesson on endurance, faith in God and hard work.

As family bonds get broken and forgotten by the day due to the inordinate pursuit of prosperity by everybody, Raymond's effort to trace his parental ancestries and lineages several generations back, should serve as a useful guide or roadmap for our easy-go-lucky, knowledge-scared youth of today to discover their social linkages or kindred systems which offer enormous social insurance to members of the extended family. This is our substitute for the social security systems of the Western world.

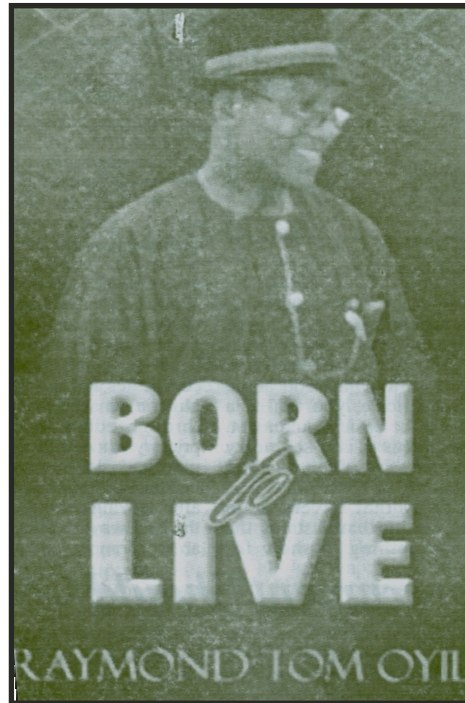
The author's account of his childhood and primary school days contrasts quite sharply with today's socio-economic conditions of prosperity in which children enjoy relative comfort at home and outside: spacious accommodation, better healthcare, lavish provisions, expensive toys, clothing, chauffeur-driven rides in luxurious cars to and from school, cash and bank accounts as well as other products of our information technology age such as lap-tops and global system of mobile telecommunication (GSM) sets. This, as it were, turns to be an irony of fate or a reversion of the intention of parents that, according to the author, has led to the entrenchment of "a youth culture which has grabbed adult populace by the throat" through youth restiveness, indiscipline, cultism. In his childhood days, society (including school teachers) had a collective responsibility in the education and discipline of children. How I wish we could rewind the tape! Society would have been a better place.

The exposition on his ethnic nationality, Abua, does not only provide good references on ethnological, anthropological and linguistic sources on Abua as "a distinct ethnic nationality", like the Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Ikwerre, Okrika, Kalabari, etc, but also touches on the Nigerian "project" and the struggle of the ethnic minorities. The author believes that it is wrong for us to define the Nigerian "project" as the "submergence of the minorities rather than the

substance of the various ethnic groups" It is hardly arguable that the problem of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria can be resolved, if our political leaders take into consideration the interests and needs of the various ethnic groups, irrespective of their numerical size (including Abua, the author's ethnic group) in sharing the national cake. The author proffers a solution to the Nigerian problem: "adequate or proportional representation of the ethnic in employment, resource allocation, admission to educational institutions, location of industrial and social infrastructure and amenities."

The author wants his ethnic nationality, Abua to be recognized, respected and treated by his fellow Nigerians as a distinct socio-political entity and not as an appendage or sub-group of a larger on immemorial, Abua had been under the suzerainty of their own King who, with other leaders, signed the treaty accepting British rule in the nineteenth century or on November 2, 1896, to be specific." In other words, the existence of Abua and other ethnic nationalities pre-dates Nigeria.

I cannot agree less on the author's call for mutual respect amongst our ethnic groups, because it is such mutual respect in a multi-racial country like the United States of America that has led to the historic election of, one from a minority, an African-American, Senator Barack Obama as President of that great country. Our ethnic diversity is a blessing rather than a curse, the author believes. He supports the call for a sovereign national conference in which Abua participates to "discuss and agree on the best terms to keep the numerous ethnic nationalities together in peace and harmony as opposed to the colonial assemblage of these nationalities under forced treaties and agreements that were not understood by the people."



For our restive youth and other citizens with truculent tendencies, the author's account of the Nigerian Civil War in Chapters Nine and Ten paints a clear picture that should make them averse to war. He advises those who did not witness the civil war thus: "I pray not to witness another civil war all the remaining days of my life. Those who preach war in our society today for whatever reason, the cultists, the militants and all those who tend to relegate dialogue to the background are mainly those who did not witness the civil war. They had better spare themselves the experience because the problem with experience as the best teacher is that the lesson comes after the test."

With a sub-title: "*From the child of the gods to a Child of God*", *Born to Live* recounts the pagan and superstitious beliefs and practices of the author's people before and even many years after the advent of Christianity. Raymond is grateful to his father who was a traditional religion practitioner, for getting him "enrolled in the Mission primary school where Christianity was taught and preached." He commends his father's foresight and magnanimous decision to show him "an alternative religion after initiating and dedicating" him "at birth to the gods that he (his father) and his ancestors worshipped." This gave him "the intellectual, physical and spiritual capacity to break away from the gods" and thus made him the Child of God that he is today. It is ironic however, that while education was a very useful tool in the author's fight against the devil (as the people perish for lack of knowledge), society today, with more educated, enlightened people and countless churches, appears to have more children of the devil than Children of God as shown by the ever increasing rates of lawlessness, violence, barbarism, brutality, kidnapping and a virtual absence from society of the fruit of God's Holy Spirit - love, patience, joy, meekness, etc.

There is also a message in *Born to Live* for our youth and their get-rich-quick mania which drives them to do anything to attain prosperity at the expense of their employers and their personal,

family and community reputation and integrity. Reading through his early childhood days when he took part in family domestic chores and farm-work, through to his various paid jobs and eventual retirement, the author's life amply signifies the dignity in labour. It is praiseworthy for the author to have kept his job for twenty-eight years in politically sensitive establishments like the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) both of which are national cash-cows and centres of attraction of Nigerians because of the rampant corruption scandals and risky financial enticements and deals believed to abound there. The lure of filthy lucre has cut short the careers of many young and promising public officers in these establishments or put them in the nets of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and other anti-corrupt practices agencies.

Intending Christian pilgrims from Rivers State to the Holy lands in Israel and Egypt will find "Reminiscences of a Jerusalem Pilgrim" in Chapter Nineteen very helpful in their preparations for the journey and conduct while in the Holy Lands. The author's vivid day-by-day account of the dynamics of the journey and his experiences is a must read for those who aspire to undertake the holy pilgrimage. Also, the officials involved in the pre-trip briefing of pilgrims will find this chapter quite useful. The author's description of the sites visited in Israel and Egypt by his batch of pilgrims and the imageries created by him will certainly invoke in the reader mental pictures of the sights to behold in the holy lands.

Chapter Twenty, "The Crux of the Matter", aptly exposes the theme of *Born to Live* as it gives a list of near fatal incidents intermittently encountered by the author over the years. Like the proverbial cat with nine lives, he miraculously escapes from these numerous brushes with death and rightly ascribes his survival from these and other life threatening situations and conditions to God's mercies and grace. This is what makes him strongly believe that he was born to live. We do not usually immediately and promptly appreciate the gravity of the danger from which we escape or easily comprehend the harm we did not suffer. In recounting these incidents, Raymond believes that they were "critically positioned and timed by God" to get him moving in his "chosen direction." Such events, according to him, "are meant to bring us nearer to God or refine us to the perfect, final product that God intends us to be." To rationalize these experiences as the author did is to pour out praises to God for His providential and protective hands over us.

One thing that greatly amazes me in *Born to Live* is the author's prodigious feat to remember the names of his classmates and teachers in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, as well as names of streets, structures, places and other details of his social and official interactions several decades after. This is worthy of emulation by the reader in order to bridge the information gap between us and posterity.

Death, which is antithetical to the theme of *Born to Live*, is an issue many people fear to discuss, yet the author, as a Christian, expresses his preparedness to meet it when God blows the whistle to stop his life's race. He however, directs the living on what to do with his "numb and ugly" body in an interesting poem (in The Musings of a Retiree, Chapter Eighteen, page 183):

WHEN I DIE

When I die as die we must,
Another home for me do not create
in a morgue.
Commit me within forty-eight
hours after my call
Six feet down on my "Endurance
Villa's" forecourt.
As the revelers and waiters gather
to dance or mourn,
My numb and ugly body, do not lay
in the hall

For all eyes to leer at, jeer and mock
When I return from whence I came, the dust,
Another reason do not seek in the oracle's dingy hut.
As he may impose enemies on you and my flock.

See it as my creator's will and every mortal's lot
As for my "enemies", a mental yoke they have got
Till the great leveler decides their own turn
To answer the sure, certain and inevitable call.

In the same vein, he offers a last prayer in a Postscript (page 218). If he were to die unexpectedly.

The numerous family photographs in the book show the author as a great lover of his children, parents, siblings and darling wife whose positive roles in shaping his life, he meticulously chronicled in "Role Models and Role players" in Chapter Four. In spite of the careful packaging and various levels of error-tight proof-reading of *Born to Live* by the author, his friend and writer of the Foreword, Dr Kombo Mason Braide and the wordsmiths of the publishing house, the dreaded *printer's devil* crept in and inflicted minor harm in a few pages. Fortunately, no syntactic damage was done anywhere and necessary corrections can be made in the next edition which the author promises to write to mark his 70th birthday in 2018. However, the author has to be more eagle-eyed in reading through his future works before mass production is done.

In conclusion, I think the author has handled the theme of *Born to Live* successfully as the content of the book is in reasonable concord with the title. The final message seems to be, whatever situation we find ourselves in, like the author did in several instances in the book, we should keep faith in God and sustain the will to live, because we are born to live even after we die as our "children and children's children will carry within them and pass on to their children the values they have learnt in us."

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