

GIANT OF THE CEMETERY

THE INSIDE STORY

IN REMEMBRANCE OF MUHAMMADU BUHARI

By

Jimmy Essien

Muhammadu Buhari passed away in a London Clinic on 13 July 2025 aged 82 years. In remembrance of the visionary statesman, this post relates the inseparable bond between Muhammadu Buhari and the socio-political thriller, *Giant of the Cemetery*. Hardly does any Nigerian know, or would even suspect, the existence of links between the late statesman Muhammadu Buhari and *Giant of the Cemetery*. The crux of the matter is Buhari's defence of the 1983 military coup that ousted the Nigerian President Shehu Shagari from power. In 2005, Muhammadu Buhari reportedly observed that "*The military came in when it was absolutely necessary and the elected people had failed the country.*" This observation reflects the unfathomable depth of the feelings that inspired the writing of *Giant of the Cemetery*. Consider the links:

Following my short and eventful stay at the University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria, as a lecturer in phonetics (1981-82), my experiences endorse Buhari's observation as one that cannot be overemphasized. *Giant of the Cemetery* was an expression of my innermost feelings with the pen, hoping that it would arouse someone in power to do what I could not achieve with the pen. Shehu Shagari's austerity measures had forced me to leave my office at Jos University. I was in Germany with feelings of being in exile since my heart was a long way away in Nigeria, and I had to go to its rescue. My mechanical typewriter was set to work; it clacked and dinged and rattled restlessly through days and nights for some six weeks creating *Giant of the Cemetery*. The manuscript was submitted to Delta publications (Nigeria) Ltd in September 1983. Things moved very fast: Agreement for publication was reached within three weeks of manuscript submission; the contract for publication was signed on 20 October 1983; the work went for typesetting with the circumstantial catchy title—*THE COUP*. Galley proofs came out fast; proofreading and corrections suffered no delays; the work was returned quickly to the publishers for final printing and binding. Towards the end of December, everything seemed set to hit the public with a New Year's gift in January 1984. The countdown had begun—barely two weeks to go.

And then, in one night, everything proved to have been a dream. On 31 December 1983, the Nigerian army struck, and the coup that lurked in everyone's heart and mind had become a reality. Shehu Shagari lost the power of the people to a handful of men with

the gun, and Muhammadu Buhari became the new head of state. The book went back to press to undo *THE COUP* and revert to *Giant of the Cemetery*. During the televised launching of the book, soldiers were apparently thrilled at holding a copy.

Obviously, Nigerians had had enough and wanted the Shehu Shagari's government out of power. The social, political, and economic atmospheres had been tensed to say the least. The strings that controlled activities in Nigeria had been pulled tight to the extreme limit. The frustration in everyone's daily activities betrayed the feeling that Nigerians could not survive another day struggling to keep their heads above water only to die of thirst while the nation was drowning in oil. Schools and universities and hospitals lacked equipment while the few privileged wealthy families enjoyed uninterrupted health care and education abroad, financed by the sweat of their poor? Happily, under Shehu Shagari, the media had the freedom to inform the public of any shortcomings in the nation's governance. Buhari's observation on the *absolute* necessity for a change carries more impact than many realize. I witnessed it; I felt it, and I groaned out in plain language and in symbols in *Giant of the Cemetery*.

Today, though, I have grown wiser. I wonder if it was the right thing to do. I have come to realize that no one has enough fingers to raise for what is right in a world characterized by wrongs. Nevertheless, the book is there to help interested ones understand how Nigeria transitioned from a pride of place in the world to its present beggarly state as the world's notorious pauper and mendicant.

Giant of the Cemetery describes a daunting and ambitious task that was achievable only in a dream in the absence of a saviour in the real world for Nigeria's volatile makeup. Today, it is no longer a dream, but a dream come true! Whereas the Nigerian Naira was exchanged at par with the British pound in the mid-1960, today a pound buys two thousand and twenty Naira! The land that was sinking in oil cannot deliver water, let alone power, to its inhabitants. The world stares at Nigeria with unconscious gasps: Too bad! Too bad, you giant of Africa!! Truly, as *Giant of the Cemetery* foretold 40 years ago, it has come to pass. The work leaves no room for guesses; rather it helps everyone appreciate the abundant warning signs that the leaders had rejected and swept under the carpet.

Buhari saw the need for a change and acted to the relief of all. It is one thing, though, to fight for a change, it is another thing altogether to live in harmony with rules that sustain change. Today, looking back at the import of military coups in Nigeria, I have come to realize that the soldiers did not fight in the interest of the common people, but for a password—the power of the gun—for access to the nation's treasury, to oil the faces of those who controlled the nation's gun. Buhari rose by the gun and fell by the gun. Nevertheless, his determination to contribute whatever he had to the nation was beyond the reach of any bullet. He failed thrice to seize the role of a civilian statesman, but did not give up, probably hoping that he might just deliver with his bare hands the

complicated tasks he could not accomplish with the gun. Solutions kept slipping through the fingers. Was it truly a weakness peculiar to Muhammadu Buhari?

Human leaders all over the world manifest this deficiency because the creator of man tells us that man was not created to rule over man (Jeremiah 10:23; Ecclesiastes 8:9). Despite imperfection, it is against nature to look on passively at a suffering fellow human or even an animal without stretching out a helping hand in any way possible. If that is wrong, who cares to know what is right? William Wilberforce said: "*They charge me with fanaticism. If to be feelingly alive to the sufferings of my fellow creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large.*" His relentless campaigns stopped the trans-Atlantic slave trade, it was abolished. However, he did not stop slavery and human domination of man. It happens everywhere and anywhere; the only difference is its alarming proportion among rulers of Third World nations. After all, when the British Prime Minister contracted Covid-19, he did not fly to a foreign hospital for treatment, because his nation, despite challenges, had given to its people what rightly belonged to its people, and he shared it with them—the rich and the poor. Describing the greed leading to the pathetic situation in developing nations, the hero in *Giant of the Cemetery* wondered: "Is it the negligence of a man? The weakness of a nation?" He concluded: "No. It is the shame of a race."

Thus, imperfection characterizes human rulership over man. Like tombstones, all exhibit their embellished exterior; down below, though, the reality stinks. We are all guilty one way or another. Muhammadu Buhari made his contributions. Whereas his successors might want to drum on his imperfection, may the few having insights into the human condition not entomb his virtues with his bones.

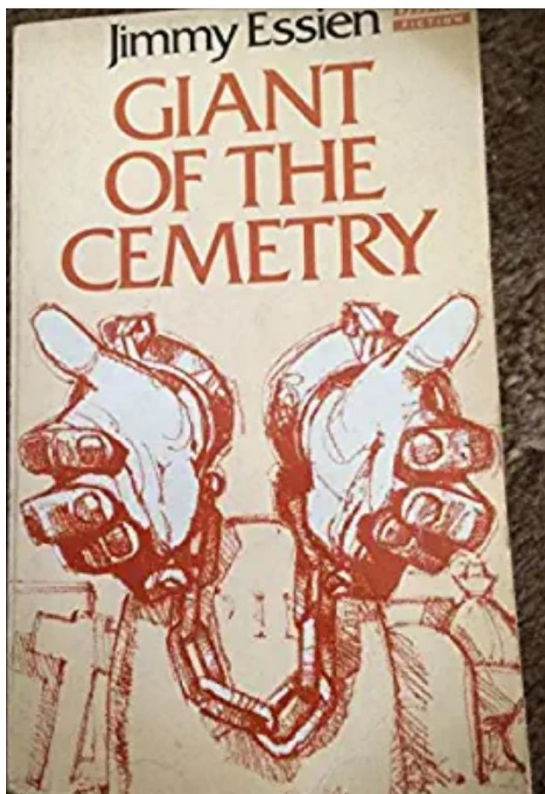
Synopsis

Giant of the Cemetery

Jimmy Essien was awarded a PhD degree at Sorbonne University, Paris, for his research work in acoustic phonetics and perception of music and speech. However, Jimmy Essien is renowned for writing *Giant of the Cemetery*. It was first published in 1985 by Delta Publications (Nigeria) Ltd. 'Reginians' had survived slavery and colonialism only to be worse off under the indigenous rulers who stepped into the shoes of their colonial masters. Many bloody military coups failed to remedy the situation in Reginia—the most powerful and most corrupt fictional nation of the black race. However, an undaunted civilian, feelingly alive to the sufferings of his fellow citizens, assumed the challenge to stamp out corruption, eradicate tribalism, establish equality, all without firing a single shot. Will his anti-violence plot succeed? This gripping tale of courage and endurance, with its intriguing symbolism, adds a sophisticated facet to African literature.

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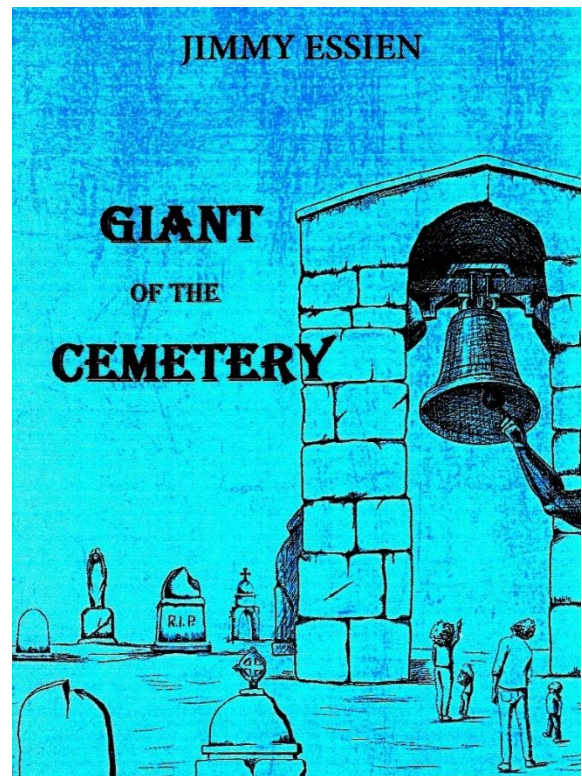
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