

## **THE UNETHICAL OPERATION OF THE NIGERIAN ARMY THAT MARRIED THE UNITY OF NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria is not an exception to seizing of power by the military. This study focused on military intervention in Nigeria political life. It aimed at examining the causes and consequences of military intervention in Nigeria political system. Some of its objectives included examining the origin and historical foundation of the Nigeria military; tracing records of military coups in the country, interrogating reasons advanced for such interventions examining the constitutional priorities of the Nigerian military, and what the influence of religion and ethnicity posed on the stability and co-operate existence of Nigeria. To achieve the above, the study applied diachronic approach which entails taking events bit by bit. The findings revealed, among other things, that though there seems to be no single variable serving as a key to a definitive explanation of the phenomenon of incessant military appropriation of power in Nigeria, however, the study asserted that faulty foundation, religion, ethnicity and none commitment by the military personnel to the core values and norms establishing the military remain major causal factors. The study calls for a more patriotic military to avert the co-operate dismemberment of Nigeria.*

**Key words:** Military, Power, Politics, Ethnicity and Religion.



## Introduction

One of the most remarkable events in the world in the past decades is the frequent occurrence of military intervention or coups in Africa and other third world countries. Where they seize power and over throw the democratically elected government, in fact according to Okadigbo, it is the specification of authoritarian government wherein power is held by soldiers or wherein soldiers constitute a norminally civilian government known as military government.<sup>1</sup> Soldiers who took over leadership through *coup de tat* justifies their actions by citing unity and stability of a country as the reasons for their action. Gutteridge asserts that it is now statistically justified to regard military rule as a norm rather than a deviance, certainly in comparison with any other satisfactorily defined forms of government.<sup>2</sup> Nigeria is not an exception to seizing of power by the army and only one thing is so far certain about military takeover of government that affirms the fundamental instability of military government themselves. There is no single variable serving as a key to a definitive explanation of the phenomenon of incessant military appropriations to power. But one may assert that faulty foundation is the major issue that led to military intervention in Nigeria.

The Nigerian army was an off shoot of a faulty foundation and that is why its actions and reactions have marred the unity of Nigeria. According to Ukpabi, the Nigerian army, which grew from the West African Frontier Force, was an admission by the colonial secretary. He opines that;

*The West African Frontier Force, a child of circumstance, came into existence in 1897 as a counter against the French during the critical period of the Anglo-French rivalry in the Nigeria... The force was essentially the brain child of Joseph Chamberlain, the British colonial*

*secretary, and was the ultimate answer to the growing military commitments of the British government on the west coast of Africa.* <sup>3</sup>

The tense situation on the Niger, during the 1890s was what brought about the military factor in political issues that is why up till date, the military have never seized to interfere in internal civil matters that ordinarily should have been affairs of the police. The various colonial governments at the Nigerian coast maintained local military units which were small, ill-trained and ill-equipped and which were also used mainly for police and military duties within the area under the control of *the* British government. For instance, the Royal Niger Company, which controlled the Niger-Delta area up to the River Benue, maintained a military force and, the colonial office controlling Lagos colony and its adjacent protectorate also had its military formation. That was motivated by the desire to maintain and share in the regional trade of the Niger area, known in history as British gunboat influence.<sup>4</sup> Records of British military interventions, expeditions and campaigns from 1851 to about 1920 against many villages, towns, kingdoms, communities that came to form the present day Nigeria abound in several hundreds of volumes.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis therefore was that the colonial masters made use of the army constituting the black people and equipped with fire arms to entrench or establish their interest against the wellbeing of Africans (Nigerians) and for the selfish interest of the military personnel who had the ambition to win the highly coveted military medals or titles of achievement and honour. That was the faulty foundation and beginning of the unprofessional and unhealthy intervention of the military in Nigerian national life.

## **Origin of the Nigerian Military**

As discussed earlier, the West African Frontier Force was the brain child of Joseph Chamberlain, the British colonial secretary and the ultimate answer to the growing military commitments to British government on the West African Coast. The name was adopted in 1898 to describe all the forces in the British colonies of Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, i.e. when the Royal Niger constabulary, Niger Coast Protectorate Force, the Gold Coast and Lagos constabularies as well as the Sierra Leone Frontiers police were amalgamated according to the report of the inter-department committee on amalgamation of forces in West Africa.<sup>6</sup> That there was to be an Inspector General for the whole of West African Force who would render an annual report on the regiment based in each colony and each regiment had its own commandment. Between 1897 to 1914, many battalion, companies and Regiment were created and repositioned for the takeoff of the Nigeria military. By 1914, the Nigerian Regiment was also reorganized to be semi-independent and by 1945-1953, the Nigerian regiment was renamed the Queen's own Nigeria Regiment. By 1956 when it became obvious that Gold Coast will gain independence, the WAFF was disbanded with each component unit independent of the other and Nigerian Regiment became known as Nigeria Military Forces (1956). The last of the British General Officer Commanding (GOC) Nigerian army was major. Gen. Christopher Farle Welby-Everad left in 1964.<sup>7</sup>

The Nigerian military as an ideal and puritanical institution has its values and norms which made it a unique institution as its officers and men receive training that help them imbibe austere attitudes and high sense of discipline and responsibility. The military are saddled with the responsibility of conducting air, ground and sea battles in favour of Nigeria as Section 217 Sub section 2 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria postulates. Four (4) key defense priorities are essential



for the professional operations of the Nigerian Military and they are:

- To defend the territorial integrity of Nigeria from violation on all sides.
- To deter attack by any nation and should deterrence fail, to bring any war to a rapid conclusion in favour of Nigeria.
- To provide aid to civil power, suppressing insurrection and acting to restore civil order when called upon to do so by an act of National Assembly.
- To aid sub-regional, regional, global peace initiatives and any other arrangement or agreement that may be entered into from time to time by the federal government of Nigeria. <sup>8</sup>

Professionally speaking, military officers who depend highly on commitment as soldiers must be committed to the above stated core values and norms to discharge their services to the country. The mission of soldiering requires tasks that are hazardous. The Nigerian military in training were made to be professional in their conducts, and discipline is the first aspect of military professionalism. That was why the military incursion in governance makes discipline a dialectics - "logical" that is the only way the Nigerian society can be healthy if discipline is made part of the national life. Discipline is the one thing upon which all other societal virtues are built. In the days of Napoleonic warfare, tight formations of fighting men, aiming and firing in precise unison were crucial to Victory on the battle field.<sup>9</sup> Professionalism enables the Nigerian military to execute the various national development plans with standard and precision. The education and training of officers and men, the enduring infrastructure executed by military governments made them professionals. Professionalism is key to complex battle plans and joint operations between different branches of the armed forces as there can be no skill without the discipline, discipline without the commitment to endure. According to Tafawa Balewa who was



the then Prime Minister of Nigeria in various debates in the House of Representatives in 1958 on how to make Nigerian military a professional institution, argued that the standard to be aimed at were those obtainable in the British army and to defend his argument, he entered into agreement with some officers from British army to train the Nigerian military and to provide military leadership even after independence and also imposed on the military, necessary defense pact known as Anglo-Nigerian pact of 1957-58 which allowed Nigerian military to continue to receive military equipment and supplies from the British army and to also inherit colonial military equipment. <sup>10</sup> This colonial inclination was the issue that specked the unethical conduct of the army that marred Nigerian co-operate existence. And to further show that colonial cleavage was part of the problem of Nigeria, at independence, Nigeria also inherited from the British colonial administration a military force, which comprised of the army and navy, no air force, the strength was about 7,878 officers and men excluding navy with only 50 Nigerian officers. The British administration created and maintained a small military as an instrument of internal security and for ceremonial purposes and that proved that colonial heritage was designed to make the military weak and thereby venture into politics because their inclination is built on ceremonials. That made the Nigerianization of officer corps slow and the indigenous governments were satisfied with maintaining a small army as inherited from British since external security was the responsibility of the colonial government. According to Luckham;

*..this image was carried over into the early independence period. The army was there to provide support for the fledging state, to help maintain law and order and provide the ritual parades, march pasts and guards of honour that gladden a politician's heat.<sup>11</sup>*



The statement proved that when they exposed the military to politics, they operate at the pleasures of the civilian *modus operandi* against professional conducts. Again, the Nigerianization exercise to transfer command of the army from British to Nigerian soldiers unwittingly, stratified the military on ethnic line. By the middle of 1960, the most senior military officers were career soldiers who had originally enlisted as "Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and then risen through the ranks. Most of them were Yorubas - Samuel Ademulegun, Babafemi Ogundipe, Ralph Shodeinde and Robert Adebayo) immediately behind them in seniority were the first Sandhurst - trained generation of Nigerian officers largely Kanuri Muslims from the North - Zakariya Mai-malari, Umar Lawan, Kur Mohammed etc). Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi was the only member of the military's top stratum that was not a Yoruba or Kanuri. The Lt. Colonels were ethnically diverse - Ejoor, Ojukwu, Kurubo etc but many of the majors were Sandhurst trained Igbo and most junior officers like Lieutenants and NCOs were Northerners who were encouraged to join the military by an army recruitment campaign by Northern politicians. That meant that when the senior strata of the military hierarchy ended their careers, their successor commanders would inevitably emerge from the middle-grade officers from one ethnic group who will be directly commanding mostly subordinates from other ethnic majorities. The impact was the coups that were given ethnic colourations rather than interest of the plotter - January 15, 1966 Coup, tagged Igbo coup, counter coup of July 29, 1966 tagged Hausa Coup, July 29, 1975, Feb. 13, 1976, Dec. 31<sup>st</sup> 1983, 27 August 1985, all were given ethnic colouration and bias.<sup>12</sup>

When Welby-Everard the last British General Officer Commanding (GOC) was due to leave the Nigerian army in 1965 to mark the completion of the Nigerianization of the Nigerian military, the trio of Aguiyi-Ironsi, Ademulegun and Maimalari



were perceived as favourites to succeed him, the issue of choosing the first indigenous GOC became an unofficial political campaign among the officers corps and generated much debate and gossip in the officers mess. The most seniors of Aguiyi-Ironsi, Ademulegun and Maimalari did not see eye to eye with each other, opposing camps developed within the officers corps, officers who were close to politicians went so far as to give their recommendations to their political contacts. The accelerated promotions of the Nigerian nation programme created unrealistic 'Career expectation among some junior officers who were impatient for promotions and seemingly wanted to become generals overnight. Some of the better educated Sandhurst officers and graduate officers felt that older senior officers were pro-establishment, unimaginative and not fit to command the army.

Furthermore, the methods of recruitment in the military created an ethnic stratification among the officers and men. This is because at the Nigerianization of the military, where most of the officers were Southerners and their subalterns and NCOs were mostly Northerners. Northerners typically enlisted in combat units while Southerners tended to enter technical units. This created a regional dichotomy with well-educated Southerners who dominated the officers corps and technical units while the Northerners developed the temperament comfortable in the infantry units making them see themselves as warriors and the Southerners seeing themselves as erudite and sophisticated in military thereby creating military dominated by one ethnic nationality and a civilian government dominated by another ethnic nationality creating fear of domination and danger. According to the then Prime Minister, "... We are all surrounded by Igbo officers... If anything happens, they are going to kill us..."<sup>13</sup> Concurring to what Lashmer Whistler who was a former colonel commandant of the Royal West African Frontier Force





said when they were complaining about Igbo domination of the officers' corps, he argues that the Northerners were architects of their problem,

*...having resisted all attempts by the British authorities to achieve greater penetration of western education in the Northern region, for not putting educated Northerners forward for officer admission,<sup>14</sup>*

Max Siollum argued that rather than wait for large number of suitable qualified northerners to emerge, the then Defense Minister (a Northerner) shifted the goalpost and lowered the educational bar for officers admission and the introduction of a regional quota system. This quota allocated a percentage of military recruitments to each region, with the Northern region having a guaranteed 50% quota of officers admissions, the educational requirements for officers admission was also reduced for them thus making it easier for less educated Northerners to enlist. The Eastern region was only given 25% and the Western region 25%. This was made possible because of the four most senior post in the Ministry of Defense occupied by Northerners - The Defense Minister, Minister of State for the Army, Ministry of Defense Permanent Secretary and Deputy Permanent Secretary. Inuwa Wada, Ibrahim Tako Galadima, Sule Kolo and Ahmadu Kuril respectively. <sup>15</sup> Northern politicians seized on the quota system as a way of guaranteeing a sizeable Northern representative in the military and this act of foresight by them bore fruit for decades as most who benefited from this enlistment have and are playing decisive roles in Nigeria's political destiny. They also tracked and encouraged the career progression of the Northern officers.

The Northern political interference in military process increased Northern recruitment into the officer corps, and degraded the standard of the military professionalism. The lowering in



educational entrance standards antagonized some Southern officers who feared that the Northern-led government had the agenda of expanding political dominance of the country to the military where merit were abandoned on the alter of Northern numerical representation in the officers' corps. The Southerners who tend to score very highly, in the entrance exams were not enlisted but the Northerners with lower scores were enlisted.

### **How it Marred the Co-operate Existence of Nigeria**

*Nigeria is like being on an airplane that has just been taken over by hijackers. You do not want to compromise with the gunmen, but the prime concern is to land the plane, so there is no choice but to give in.<sup>16</sup>*

The politicization of the military created a crop of officers and men who are fast and interested in driving the Nigerian political vehicle and when the political situation in Nigeria which was characterized by struggle for power among the major political parties, led to hostile ethnic rivalries, victimization, threat and electioneering campaigns that turned violent, the military saw it as an opportunity to take over the wheels of the Nigerian government. The first shot was on 15 January 1966 code named "Damisa" led by Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu who argued that the coup was to

*...bring an end to gangsterism and disorder, corruption and despotism... we wanted to get rid of rotten and corrupt ministers, political parties, trade unions and the whole clumsy apparatus of federal system.<sup>17</sup>*

That was the introduction of a new type of government that held sway in Nigeria for well over 20 years. After the first military coup on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1966, it was followed by a counter coup of 29<sup>th</sup> July 1966 which was a revenge mission for the Northern officers who conceived the idea in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. It was followed by pogrom against the Easterners and their



properties and by May 30th 1967, Lt. Col. Odumegbwo Ojukwu declared the independent state of Biafra and thus began the civil war of 1967 - January 10 1970. Some years after the civil war and the reintegration of Eastern region, there was another coup on July 29<sup>th</sup> 1975 which seems to be bloodless as not many were killed. By 13<sup>th</sup> February 1976, there was also an abortive coup led by Lt. Col. B.S, Dimka who succeeded in killing the then Head of State Gen. Murtala Mohammed. , Gen. Obasanjo took over the reins of government. There was a break until 31<sup>st</sup> Dec. 1983 when the then civilian president Shehu Shagari was overthrown by another bloodless coup that announced Major General Mohammadu Buhari. By 1985 August 27, Buahri administration was overthrown by Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and other military officers. Babangida's administration was the longest of all and had many attempted coups such as Mmman Vasta 1985, Okar Gideon in 1990, Col, Lawan Gwadabe 1995, failed coup that was during Sani Abacha regime and the Gen Diya uncovered coup of Dec. 21<sup>st</sup> 1997. <sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The long military entrance into the wheels of governance impacted much on the citizenry. These impacts can be seen in Nigeria language, behavior, morals, ethnically and culturally. The language of the people shows that rather than urging the people, to do things, they are moved by cohesive words which are not the best way of making people work well and without fear. The militarization of people' behaviours are seen daily on Nigerian roads in chaotic situation, bank queue, social gatherings and the attitude to work have assisted in promoting unhealthy living. Morals have been eroded among Nigerian people as quest for power and wealth have taken over almost every citizen of Nigeria. People tend to be more to their ethnic nationality where they support whatever that is coming from them even when they are not of best interest of all. Culturally, the people have adopted the



culture of sectionalism, grab and grab and embezzlement against Nigerian interest and detriment of the Nigerian state. The crops of democratically elected leaders are all those who saw that military incursion into governance are profitable fast and without challenges but a free way of getting rich quick.

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