

RE-VISITING THE MILITARY *COUP D'ÉTAT* IN NIGERIAN POLITICAL LIFE 1966-1997: A HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

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Abstract

*On 15 January, 1966 a group of young army officers, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, abandoned their traditional aloofness from politics and broke out of their splendid isolation in military barracks to storm Nigeria in a most horrific *coup d'état* in which top political and military leaders were assassinated in cold blood. Although the coup plotters failed in their desire to establish a new government of their choice, their action terminated the elected federal government of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and brought the military into the political landscape of Nigeria, which it dominated from 1966 to 1999. Within this period, the military exhibited a political behavior in which rival factions of its elite competed for the control of political power by means of the *coup d'état*. Existing attempts at explaining the *coup d'état* phenomenon are dominated by social science theories, which neither adequately nor accurately account for the Nigerian situation. Using historical inquiry, this paper has gone beyond the social science theories to offer an explanation, which accommodates, within broad categories, the peculiar circumstances in which each *coup d'état* occurred in Nigeria. Thus it is found, for example, that the manner of the historical evolution of Nigeria and its attendant forces of ethnic nationalism and regionalism; the orientation, exposure, personal interest, ambition, and idiosyncrasies of Nigerian military officers, and factionalism within the military organisation as well as the changing external political environment most validly, accurately, and empirically explain the *coup d'état* phenomenon in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Military, Coup, Nigeria, Historical, Explanation

Introduction

A *coup d'état* is a forceful or violent, abrupt change of government or seizure of political power in a state by a small group of people, be they military personnel or civilians or a collaboration of both. The central elements in a *coup d'état*, therefore, are secrecy, surprise, violence, and the smallness of the body of troops involved in the operation.

Since the 1960s the *coup d'état* by the military has been the dominant means of regime change in Africa, where it has continually established itself and vitiated the growth of democratic culture. Although most entrenched in Africa, the *coup d'état* had its beginning in antiquity, outside Africa. A classical occurrence of the *coup d'état* was first recorded in 876 BC, when an Israeli military commander, Zimri, killed Elah, the 4th king of Israel, and usurped the throne.¹ In modern Africa the *coup d'état* started in Egypt, when Gamel Abdel Nasser, an Egyptian military officer, led a military operation in which King Farouk of Egypt was overthrown on 23 July, 1952. This singular event opened the floodgate for subsequent *coups d'état* in other parts of Africa, including Nigeria.

In recent times the military *coup d'état* has been the subject of intense scholarly focus, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Attempts by political scientists and sociologists to unravel the nature of this historical occurrence has resulted in a plethora of theories aimed at explaining the *coups d'état*. Examples of these theories, as required within the focus of this paper, are hereinafter explained.¹

There is the theory, that "negative price fluctuations in commodity exports [since the 1960s were] casually related to third-world coups."² The central position of this theory is, that

military *coups d'état* are products of, or responses to, the negative price fluctuations on the local political economies of the third world countries.

Also explaining the military *coup d'état* along this paradigm is the reactive theory. Under the theory, military interventions are seen as "reactive" movements, provoked by deteriorating broader social and political crises.³

Another theory, associated with Pat McGowan and Thomas Johnson, links the *coup d'état* with underdevelopment. These scholars are of the view, that there is a nexus between military coups and the failure of independent African states to achieve economic growth and development. They further explain, that "the frustrations emanating from unsuccessful industrialisation and the escalating expectations of modernisation have been the key elements behind the African coup virus."⁴

The military *coup d'état* has also been externalised in another theory, which links it with such extraneous forces as neo-colonial control, imperialist economic domination, and attempts to stabilise the local conditions for oversea capital. The scholars related with this theory are Murraray, Saul, Hutchful, and Brett.⁵

The *coup d'état* has also been associated with low political culture and weak political institutions. This theory, fronted by Finer and Huntington, presupposes that a state with low, weak, and undeveloped political institutions such as weak political parties, inept political leadership, and low political mobilisation are prone to the military *coup d'état*.⁶

When *coups d'état* that led to the enthronement of radical and "progressive" military regimes occurred in the third world

countries in the 1970s and 1980s, Marxist scholars quickly rushed the theory, that the *coup d'état* was now the product of a burgeoning nationalist and anti-imperialist movement, committed to revolutionary transformation.⁷ For this reason, the regimes that were installed by these so called revolutionary coups were quickly tagged "Marxist Regimes."⁸

Morris Janowitz links the *coup d'état* with the internal characteristics of the military organisation itself. According to him, military officers with similar educational backgrounds, skills, careers, and ethical orientation, as well as similar social, political, and ideological exposure, tend to easily get inclined as a group to intervene in politics. Thus, the higher the cohesiveness of the military organisation, the greater capacity it could muster to intervene in domestic politics by means of the *coup d'état*.⁹

While the Janowitz's theory looks at the military as an ensemble, another theory rather locates a lack of cohesion in the military organisation as being responsible for the *coup d'état*. This theory sees the existence of cleavages, peer groups, and factions within the military as instrumental to counter military coups.¹⁰

There is also the custodian theory,¹¹ which has come under much articulation since the first decade of the 21st century. According to this theory, the military sees itself as the custodian of the constitution and the safeguard of the state. As such, the military must protect the constitution from abuse and violation. It is also the ultimate duty of the military to change, by means of the *coup d'état* any government under which the constitution is undergoing perversion and the state drifting

towards instability. In this case the military rationalises the *coup d'état* as an action, carried out in the national interest.

It is of interest to note, that social scientists have generally not gone beyond the foregoing attempts to explain the military *coup d'état*. As a result of this, the present state of theorising on the causation of this phenomenon has remained at the same level at which Eboe Hutchful had assessed it to be 26 years ago. He said:

*Nearly three decades of writing and studying the military in politics has brought us to a dead end. In spite of the wealth of military coups and resultant outflow of literature, it is doubtful that we know much about military politics than we did in the mid-sixties.*¹²

Although the theories have drawn much from the historical elements of the *coup d'état*, relatively little contribution to the explanation they offer has been made by historians. Over the years, indeed, we have had very limited understanding of the *coup d'état* in Nigeria because of the overarching influence of the social science theories on our scholarly thinking. It is now obvious, that the theories are inadequate in explaining the Nigerian military *coup d'état*, and we cannot continue to rely mostly on them in our desire for a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

Against this background, this paper aims at using the historical method of inquiry to increase our knowledge and understanding of the casual issues in the military *coup d'état* in Nigeria, where the idea of regime change through the military coup still persists. The paper, therefore, also represents a significant methodological and paradigm shift in the explanation of the *coup d'état*. While not claiming to be blazing

the trail in this shift, it is to be noted, that no causal explanation of the military *coup d' état* in Nigeria has been undertaken by any other historian on such a rigorous and comprehensive scale as done in this paper – a fact which pleads for its merit and relevance. Moreover, Eboe Hutchful's self-indicting assessment of the efforts of social scientists in the study of the military and militarism calls for a work of this nature.

Incidents of the *Coup d' État* in Nigeria

Nigeria, the focus of our study, was Britain's largest dependency in Africa. It was granted political independence on 1 October, 1960. The peaceful manner in which decolonisation was achieved, the relative stability of the country, and its initial progress in parliamentary democracy generated international confidence and interest in Nigeria, which was being increasingly seen as a beacon of democracy in Africa.

On 15 January, 1966, while the notion of Nigeria as a promising democracy was building up, a group of young army officers with small detachments of rank and file, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, staged a *coup d' état* against the Federal Government of Nigeria, which it sought to overthrow and replace with a new regime. The operation resulted in the killing of Nigeria's top political and military officers, most of who were from the Northern Region of the country, including Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa.

Frightened by the assassinations, the remaining members of the federal cabinet invited the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, Major General Johnson Thomas Umunakwe Aguyi-Ironsi, from the Eastern Region of Nigeria, to take over the government of the country on 16 January, 1966 until such a

time that peace and stability would be restored. Ironsi immediately mobilised his troops, stopped the *coup d' état*, and arrested Nzeogwu and other officers involved. Although Nzeogwu's *coup d' état* failed in its core objective of effecting a regime change by itself, it created the dynamics which terminated the elected government of Prime Minister Balewa and brought the military into the centre stage of Nigerian politics with more military *coups d' état*.

On 29 July, 1966 Major General Ironsi was killed, along with many other military officers of Eastern Region origin, in another *coup d' état* executed by military officers of Northern Region origin. A new military government, headed by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon from the Northern Region was established. Gowon's regime was characterised by a number of crises, which culminated in a civil war that lasted for two and half years. However, the regime continued until 29 July, 1975, when it was terminated by a bloodless military *coup d' état*, led by General Murtala Muhammed. On 13 February, 1976 Murtala Muhammed was assassinated in an aborted *coup d' état*, led by Lt. Col. Buka Suka Dimka. However, Murtala's regime, with the policies it had laid down, was continued by his deputy, General Olusegun Obasanjo, who took over the leadership of the government. Obasanjo ended a thirteen years' military rule when he formerly handed over government to a democratically elected regime, under Alhaji Shehu Shagari, on 1 October, 1979. Shagari, who was re-elected president after his first term of four years, was overthrown in another military *coups d' état* on 31 December, 1983. Shagari's overthrow ushered in another military regime, headed by Brigadier, later Major-General, Muhammadu Buhari, who led the coup. On 27 August, 1985

Buhari and his powerful deputy, Major-General Tunde Idiagbon, were forced out of office in a military putsch, which brought into power General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida as the first military president. General Babangida's regime survived one coup plot in 1986. The plot, allegedly sponsored by Major General Maman Vatsa, was foiled at its planning stage. It also survived the attempted bloody *coup d'état* of 22 April, 1990, led by Major Gwazo Gideon Orkar. Babangida put on course a transition to civil rule programme, which culminated in the conduct of a presidential election on 12 June, 1993. However, he annulled the election on 23 June, 1993, using the tango of legal and political controversies surrounding it as an excuse. Babangida appointed what he called Interim National Government (ING), headed by a civilian, Chief Ernest Adegunle Oladeinde Shonekan. On Thursday, 26 August, 1993, at about 4:00 p.m., the ING was sworn into office,¹³ and on the same day, Babangida handed over power to it, thus ending his reign in exactly eight years.

As Ewa has noted, "The Interim National Government... was a political contraption, lacking in will, courage, and legitimacy and ill able to move the country forward."¹⁴ Thus in what seemed more like a *coup de grace* than a *coup d'état*, Lt. General Sanni Abacha, the Defence Secretary and cabinet member in the ING, forced Shonekan out of office on 17 November, 1993, terminating the most tenuous regime in the history of independent Nigeria.

Following the exit of Shonekan, Abacha took over as military head of state. Like Babangida's government, the Abacha regime foiled two military *coups d'état* at their stages of conception. The first was on 5 July, 1995 and the second on

22 December, 1997. Abacha, however, died on the throne on 8 June, 1998. He was succeeded by Lt. General Abdulsalam Abubakar on the same day. Abubakar handed over power to a democratically elected government on 29 May, 1999, without any incident of *coup d'état*.

Explaining the *Coup d'État*

Some of the events in history are simply the superficial products of powerful fundamental historical forces. The forces bring the events about by acting upon their potential agents. In some respects, the military *coup d'état* in Nigeria can be located within the trajectory of such powerful fundamental historical forces as ethnicity, regionalism, politics, and corruption, which have shaped the evolution and character of Nigeria as a nation since 1914.

In carving out Nigeria as a colonial state, the British brought within it numerous ethnic groups, with diverse cultural and historical backgrounds. Throughout the colonial period, the British made no effort to bring together the different ethnic groups as a nation. Indeed, political, social, and administrative policies, as pursued by the colonial regime, were rather anti-nation, as they exacerbated existing ethnic differences. The British also ran Nigeria as a federation of regions, which were created along ethnic factors. The administration of Nigeria took off in 1914 with two regions known as the Northern Provinces and the Southern Provinces. In 1939 the latter was divided into two, thus increasing the regions to three.¹⁵ These were the Northern Region, accommodating the Hausa-Fulani as its major ethnic group, the Eastern Region, where the Igbo were the dominant ethnic group, and the Western Region, dominated by

the Yoruba. In 1963, three years after the British exit, the small Mid-West Region was created from the Western Region to accommodate numerous minority ethnic groups and some Igbo-speaking communities.

Nigeria's three major political parties since the 1950s also evolved along the same ethno-regional pattern. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) evolved as a Northern Region based party, dominated by the Hausa-Fulani. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), an Igbo-led party, was based in the Eastern Region; while the Action Group (AG), which was dominated by the Yoruba, had the Western Region as its base. The development of these ethno-regional structures bred ethnic and regional particularisms, rivalry, and a sharp competition for power at the centre, and control of strategic national institutions. The policy of nurturing separate ethnic and regional identities was also reflected in the Nigerian Army, which, since its inception in the second half of the nineteenth century, was recruited and organised on ethnic and regional basis.¹⁶ At independence, therefore, Nigeria emerged, not really as a nation, but as a loose and inchoate arrangement of mutually rival and antagonistic ethnic groups and regions at the centre of which stood an old-fashioned military that had for long been incubating ethnicity and regionalism.¹⁷

Nowhere, following independence in 1960, was Nigeria's ethno-regional rivalry and antagonism better expressed than in the hanker for political power and the control of the military - the source of ultimate power. Even before independence in 1960, the Northern Region had begun to position itself for the control of the military. As it has been stated by Ewa:

Indeed, thoughts and plans by Northern politicians for the control of the Nigerian military must have started in about 1956, when it became obvious that Nigeria was moving irreversibly towards independence within the next few years. It was then foreseen that the North, given its numerical advantage, would take the political leadership of the country and would, therefore, require to control the military in order to safeguard its political position and interest.¹⁸

One way of achieving such control was to ensure that the composition of the military was based on regional quotas proportionate to the size of the Northern Region, which had always been more than half of the country. It was not accidental, therefore, that in 1958 the Defence Council, which was then in charge of defence matters and over which Prime Minister Balewa had some measure of influence, decided that the composition of the army should reflect 50% North, 25% East, and 25% West.¹⁹ In 1963 the quota for the West was reduced to 21% in order to allow 4% for the newly created Mid-West Region. The implementation of this policy started in 1958 for the rank and file and in 1961 for the officer corps. In spite of the fact that this policy would justifiably put in place a fairly representative army, with a sustainable ethnic balance, it was generally perceived by army officers from the East and West as a device to perpetually enthrone Northern dominance and control of the military. This perception inspired the *coups d'état* of 15 January, 1966 against the Northern-led federal government as indicated by Adewale Ademoyega, a leader of the coup.²⁰ Thus the coup was, to a considerable measure, a reaction of Igbo, supported by some Yoruba, army officers against what

they saw as Northern domination.²¹ The ethnic element in the coup of 15 January, 1966 has been appropriately commented upon by S.O. Arifalo and O. E. Udofia: "The 15 January coup itself had been marked by ethnicism and partiality..."²² wrote the latter. The former remarked: "Fears of northern dominance.... combined with a tinge of ethnicity and revolutionary zeal, brought revolution."²³ Adamu Ciroma, a contemporary Northern Region politician, has also explained, that the coup of 15 January, 1966 was sectional in its interest, as it was staged and supported by people who "wanted to eliminate what they regarded as Northern dominance in Nigerian politics."²⁴ The coup of 29 July, 1966, which brought into being Nigeria's second military regime under General Yakubu Gowon, was also ethnic in orientation. It was planned not only to avenge the killing of Northern politicians and army officers during the coup of 15 January, 1966, but also to put an end to the Igbo-sponsored and goaded regime of General Ironsi and effect a return to the old order of Northern political leadership. In this, the coup was successful. About the coups of January and July, 1966 Major General Joseph Garba said: "The first two coups were ethnic backed coups conspired and executed. The first to get rid of Northern politicians, the second to avenge."²⁵ Retired Lt. General Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma, who was then a major in the army and who effected the arrest and murder of Ironsi, confessed in 1992, that the 29 July, 1966 *coup d' état* was carried out "to avenge the death of fellow officers from the north in the January 15, 1966 coup."²⁶ Moreover, the ethno-regional nature of the two coups was demonstrated by the pattern of killings, which resulted therefrom. In the first coup, mostly Northern politicians and military officers were killed. In

the second, many Igbo officers in the army were murdered by officers of Northern origin. Major Gideon Orkar cited, as one of his reasons for staging the 22 April, 1990 coup against President Babangida's government, the domination and marginalisation of the peoples of the Middle Belt and the South by the feudalistic and aristocratic North.²⁷ Thus ethno-regional rivalry and antagonism, that were developed and sustained by British rule, led, in half a decade after independence, to the introduction of the *coup d'état* into the political and military history of Nigeria.

The *coup d'état* in Nigeria can possibly be linked with the politicisation of the military, which dates back to the time of independence. The politicisation process began with the regional quota policy, which was not only used in the recruitment of military personnel but also in the promotion, appointment, and training of officers. Under this policy, promotions, appointments, and further training for officers were not based on merit and seniority as in the past but on the number of vacancies allocated to each region. Officers especially from the Eastern and Western Regions, with very limited vacancies, generally had to lobby the politicians in power, who now had control of the military leadership, to be able to get promotions, appointments, or nominated for further training. This way of struggling for what ordinarily could have been obtained on merit and seniority persuaded officers to associate with partisan politicians and to consequently develop interest in national political and public affairs.

The military was further politicised when it was used in the suppression of political conflicts such as the Tiv Riots of 1964, the constitutional crisis between the president and the prime minister following the 1964 federal election,²⁸ and the

Western Region parliamentary elections of 1965. The involvement of military personnel in these conflicts virulently politicised the military and created within it political cleavages, which reflected those in the Nigerian political scene. Thus the 15 January, 1966 *coup d' état* in particular can be explained as the logical consequence or climax of the politicisation process of the Nigerian military. To be more specific, the military's politicisation process produced the *dramatis personae* of the 15 January, 1966 *coup d' état*. Thus, Majors Nzeogwu, Ifeajuna, Ademoyeya, and other officers staged the coup of 15 January, 1966 because they were politicised.

It was unlikely that a politicised military would continue to posture as a bystander in a country ravaged by corruption, maladministration, and widespread poverty, dotted with oasis of wealth fraudulently acquired by public office holders and their fronts. The military had to reposition itself as a stakeholder in the governance of the country. It began, since 1962, to poke nose into the public affairs of the country and to identify and chronicle the malfeasances of the Balewa regime in preparation for a *coup d' état*.²⁹ The disputed census of 1963, the general strike of 1964, and the controversial federal election of 1964 were among the shortcomings observed and discussed by military officers. It was observed that official corrupt practices, bribery, nepotism, inefficiency, mismanagement of resources, ineptitude, and profiteering were rampant. These occurrences and practices, which were associated with failed leadership, animated the coup of 15 January, 1966. Indeed, Nzeogwu, the leader of the coup, clearly articulated the relationship between these issues and the *coup d' état* in a radio broadcast to the public on 15 January, 1966:

*My dear countrymen, no citizen should have anything to fear... our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles, those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds... what we do promise every law-abiding citizen is freedom from fear or other forms of oppression, freedom from general inefficiency...*³⁰

It is also understandable from the foregoing, that the 15 January, 1966 *coup d' état* was a reaction to regime failure, fundamentally occasioned by corruption. Six years after the coup, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe made a statement, which established a linkage between the coup and the failure of the Balewa regime, of which he was the president. He pointedly stated that the voluntary and unanimous surrender of power to the military by the federal cabinet in the wake of the 15 January, 1966 *coup d' état* was "a verdict of self-condemnation."³¹ Adebayo Williams reinforced the connection between the coup and the decay in the Balewa regime, when he pointed "out that in 1966, the military intervened to halt the drift, the corruption and the flagrant rape of democracy perpetrated by the political class."³² Apart from the coup of 29 July, 1966, which was intensely ethnic in its dash, subsequent military *coups d' état* were rationalised around the need to stop corrupt and drifting regimes. For instance, bribery, corruption, indecision, indiscipline, and inefficiency in the public sector were some of

the reasons, which Murtala Mohammed advanced for toppling General Gowon in 1975.³³ Mismanagement of resources was also paramount among the reasons advanced by Muhammadu Buhari for overthrowing President Shehu Shagari in December, 1983.

Some of the reasons advanced by coup plotters for their actions could be corroborated by the public applause which usually followed some of the *coups d' état*. As Ejitu Ota notes, "the culture of squandermania, corruption and political ineptitude made the military take-over of 1966 and 1983 quite popular and desirable among the masses of Nigerians"[sic].³⁴ So far, the scenario in which *coups d' état* were thriving was aptly captured by Prince Tony Momoh, a minister of information in General Babangida's government, in an open letter to the nation:

*As happened since independence, while the majority of our people languished in poverty and were denied the most basic of amenities, some of our leaders took the world by storm, floating their wealth... it was on account of this messy situation that the military returned on December 31, 1983. They set out to make laws not only to discourage acts of economic brigandage in our society but also to punish the multifarious manifestations of indiscipline in the body politic.*³⁵

Similarly, Major Orkar complained of over-indulgence, mismanagement, and appropriation of the wealth of the nation by a clique of aristocrats in a situation where the rest of the people were languishing daily in hunger.³⁶ In April, 1967 Col. Gowon, a mastermind of the 29 July, 1966 coup and head of the then federal military government, indicated that his regime was

a “purely corrective one”, whose goal was “to lay the foundation for a stable civilian government and, thereafter, return to the barracks.”³⁷ As elsewhere in the third world, most of the *coups d'état* in Nigeria were, as explained by their leaders, associated with a trenchant desire to correct the ills and shortcomings of incumbent regimes. That is why such military regimes have been generally styled as “corrective”³⁸ – a term, whose usage for the Nigerian experience has become questionable, as the military regimes were generally afflicted by the very vices they were meant to curb.

Some of the military *coups d'état* were, to some extent, ideologically driven. Some of the leading officers in the 15 January, 1966 coup envisioned themselves as revolutionaries, who were gunning for a radical social change and economic transformation. It seems that in their bid for change, they were forward as well as backwardlooking, as they sought to build an egalitarian society based on the primordial African communal collectivism. This was revealed by Major Ademoyega, one of the leaders of that coup, in his visionary statement:

*Unlike those military leaders who cashed in our Revolution and ruled the people carelessly and without direction, we would certainly have created a mass political movement which would lead and vigilantly guide the nation along the path of pure democratic socialism... We agreed that we had an extreme form of capitalism in Nigeria in 1965, which was not good for a newly emergent nation. Under that system, the vast majority of our people... were extremely poor and lived in abject poverty; while a few millionaires were being created here and there... Our revolutionary principles provided for a total change of that economic order.*³⁹

Major Ifeajuna, a principal figure in the 15 January, 1966 *coup d'état*, criticised Balewa's government as "the most reactionary regime in history."⁴⁰ Danjuma pointed out that Nzeogwu "wanted Nigeria to look like China."⁴¹ The planners of the aborted coup of 13 February, 1975 also claimed to have been similarly motivated. In their broadcast to the nation, they introduced themselves as "the young revolutionaries", and Lt. Col. Dimka, who made the broadcast, later also confessed in public that they wanted to change the social order of Nigeria. The Babangida-led *coup d'état* of 27 August, 1985 was cloaked in humanitarianism.⁴² It was rationalised as a reaction to the fascist tendencies of the Buhari administration, which was accused of obliterating the fundamental human rights of the people. In general, however, the relative role of ideological considerations in the *coup d'état* remains largely indeterminate, as the claim to ideological motivations could have been no more than gestures of propaganda, intended to court support and heroism.

Some military *coups d'état* were inspired by anti-government public opinion. Since the mid 1960s, the Nigerian public opinion had upheld the military *coup d'état* as the best means of changing bad, corrupt, inept, and insensitive governments. The *coup d'état* of 15 January, 1966 took place when public opinion was gradually tilting in favour of military intervention as the ultimate solution to Nigeria's political crises and corrupt practices under the Balewa regime. In December, 1965, for instance, the *Nigerian Outlook*, an Enugu based newspaper, articulated the following opinion in respect of the government:

The Federal Government has neglected its duty. It is unable or unwilling to provide security for the

*people. The present chaos in the West could very easily spread, if not checked, to other parts of the Republic... that is why I feel that the armed forces should now intervene in order to save our country from ruin. By this I do not mean that there should be a coup. All I am saying is that the Federal Government should invite the armed forces to take over in Lagos and Ibadan and restore law and order and public confidence, while at the same time organising fresh elections in the West.*⁴³

The military regime of General Gowon and the civilian government of President Shehu Shagari were equally overthrown by means of the *coup d'état* in the midst of public expectation of military intervention.⁴⁴ Such expectation was not only expressed through criticisms in the press but also confirmed by the spectacle of euphoria and ebullience which greeted the overthrow of the regimes.

The desire among military officers to fulfill personal ambitions was a significant motivating factor in staging the *coup d'état*. The affluence, comfort, dignity, and influence associated with political office in Nigeria were attractive to officers who sought regime change through the *coups d'état*.⁴⁵ Some military officers participated in coups either because they were disgruntled with promotions and appointments or because they saw in military coups opportunities for rapid promotions and career advancement. Although these personal motivations were not often disclosed to the public by coup plotters, they have been confirmed by military officers in private interviews.⁴⁶ The General Abacha coup against Shonekan in 1993 fell within this category, as Abacha turned out to be a very greedy leader, who stole much

of Nigeria's money. In 2014 the United States took control of about \$480m stolen by Abacha.⁴⁷ Leslie Caldwell, the U.S. Assistant Attorney General, lamented this. He stated: "Rather than serve his country, General Abacha used his public office in Nigeria to loot millions of dollars, engaging in brazen acts of kleptocracy."⁴⁸

Exposure to ideas of change and literature of a political nature oriented Nigerian military officers towards the politics of the *coup d' état*. Unlike the colonial African officers and men, who were banned from reading newspapers and politically oriented literature,⁴⁹ most officers in independent Nigeria were men who either enlisted after graduation from colleges and universities or trained in military colleges abroad, where they were exposed to progressive political ideas and literature. Officers were trained in Sandhurst and Mons in Britain and in military colleges in India and U.S.A. Although the course contents in these colleges embodied little or no political education, the officers had contact with literature and ideas, which gave them a political orientation and a sense of change and leadership. In Sandhurst, the popular journal of the institution, entitled *The Wish Stream*, frequently carried speeches and articles, which emphasised change and leadership especially in the 1960s. In one editorial of the journal, the Chief of Imperial General Staff was quoted as charging the officers with: "No organism can stay the same forever. If it does, it dies. Change is inevitable."⁵⁰ Another editorial issued a similar message: "What is the outlook as we move forward into the 1960s?... The 1960s they tell us, herald the space Age... A recent speaker on the B.B.C. has even spoken of the Apocalyptic sixties... If we are to summarize the message of the

sixties, it would be in terms of youth and opportunity.”⁵¹ In general, the new officers who were trained abroad and exposed to ideas such as these came back to be interested in politics. Such interest was initially demonstrated in the spate of write-ups, which officers were publishing on contemporary political issues and situations.⁵²

The emphasis on change and leadership in the 1960s coincided with military takeover of governments in Togo, Congo Brazzaville, Burundi, and Dahomey in 1963; Garbon in 1964; Congo Leopoldville and Dahomey in 1965; and in Central African Republic and Upper Volta in 1966. The ideas of change to which they were exposed and the rapidly changing political situation in independent Africa certainly influenced Nigerian Army officers towards intervening in governance by way of the *coup d'état*. Major Ademoyeya admits, that “Nigeria was by no means aloof from this universal upsurge towards the high evaluation of the soldier-statesman.”⁵³ Since then the habit of effecting political change with armoured tanks became both a contagion and norm in the Nigerian military; and the *coup d'état* came to be seen as a normal rather than an invidious way to power.

It has been correctly argued, that the military's relative functional redundancy was responsible for military coups in Nigeria.⁵⁴ This argument derives from the observation, that military men had no meaningful and challenging roles that gave them a sense of self-fulfillment especially in peacetime. There was some measure of professional idleness among military men. This, coupled with the fact that the instruments of force were controlled by military men, encouraged them to take to military coups as part of peacetime soldiering.

The view that want of professionalism or the modicum of it in the Nigerian military was an underlying cause of the military *coup d'état* is increasingly gaining acceptability among scholars. One of the scholars identified with this view is Chukwuma Osakwe, who, in a most recent study, indicates that the Nigerian Army was far from being a professional force, especially from 1960-1965. He argues that the use of the army in the Congo Crisis during this period had a centrifugal impact on its corporate bond, which did not make for professionalism. He further notes, that "the Nigerian Army had a significant number of expatriates [sic] officers and was far from being a true national and professional army."⁵⁵ Most significantly, he refers to the use of double standards in military recruitment, the passing out of officers from multifarious training programmes, regionalism and corruption within the army, and the politicisation of the army as issues that compounded the problem of professionalism. He concludes that "the much vaunted level of professionalism did not exist and most likely contributed to the crisis and war of 1966-1970."⁵⁶

The point can be further made, that the conditions in the army, as pointed out by Osakwe, only left it with a semblance of professionalism, not strong enough to militate against any thoughts for the *coup d'état*. In the circumstance, the *coup d'état* became an irrepressible adventure among military officers.

Conclusion

Within the period, 1966 to 1997, Nigeria witnessed 11 military *coups d'état*, 6 of which resulted in regime change. The dialectical fashion in which the coups occurred made them a continuum in the political life of Nigeria in this period. Indeed, despite the return of democratic governance since 1999, it is not yet certain that the military *coup d'état* phenomenon has abated with finality, as thoughts towards the coup option as a means of usurping power or changing government still persist. Nevertheless, we hope that by our historical approach, we now have direct and more intimate acquaintance with the circumstances surrounding the coup *d'état* in Nigeria. More significantly, we would by now have achieved a greater diagnosis and, therefore, greater knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon than when we were being led mainly by the social science theories, whose poverty and inadequacy as tools of analysis had brought us to a dead end.

From the diagnosis made, it can be seen, that the problems which offered the grounds for military *coups d'état*, are still with Nigeria. For example, ethnicity, regionalism, cantankerous political rivalry and antagonism, and corruption are still major forces in Nigerian history. Neither the many years of military occupation of Nigeria's political landscape nor the spasmodic presence of civilian regimes has been able to offer any sustainable solutions to these problems. Indeed, the avowed goal of the military *coups d'état*, which has always been to change a regime for the purpose of good governance, has remained a chimera. The malapropos in which governments were changed by the military was stultifying to the development of a democratic culture and military professionalism. It is instructive, therefore, for the military to abandon the *coup d'état* culture and face the task of professionalising itself.

Notes

- ¹See *Coup d'État*,
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/zimri_\(king\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/zimri_(king)). Accessed 16, 2016.
- ²Pat McGowan and Thomas H. Johnson, "African Military *Coups d'Etat* and Underdevelopment: A Quantitative Historical Analysis," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 22, 4(1984): 648. See also their "Sixty Coups in Thirty Years – Further Evidence Regarding African Military *Coups d'Etat*," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 22, 3 (1986): 539 – 543.
- ³Eboe Hutchful, *Military and Militarism in Africa: A Research Agenda* (Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA, 1989), 5.
- ⁴McGowan and Johnson, *Journal of Modern African Studies* (1984): 659.
- ⁵Hutchful, *Military and Militarism in African*, 8. See also: Roger Murrar's paper, "Militarism in Africa," *New Life Review* 38, 1966. Edward Brett, "The Political Economy of General Amin," *IDS Bulletin* 7, 1 (1975). Eboe Hutchful. "A Tale of Two Regimes: The Military, Imperialism, and Class in Ghana," *Review of African Political Economy* 14 (1979). John Saul, "The Unsteady State; Uganda and General Amin," *Review of African Political Economy* 5, January – April (1982).
- ⁶See Samuel E. Finer's *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Paul Mall, 1962). Samuel Phillips Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 386 – 420.
- ⁷As pointed out in Hutchful's *Military and Militarism in Africa*, 10, the theory influenced various case studies of military regimes such as: Fred Haliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London): Verso, 1981). Erlich Haggai, "The Ethiopian Army and the 1974 Revolution,"

- Armed Forces and Society* 9, 3, Spring (1983). Marina Ottawa and David Ottawa, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1978).
- Emmanuel Hansen, "The Military and Revolution in Ghana," *Journal of African Marxists* Vol.2, August (1982).
- Eboe Hutchful, "New Elements in Militarism: Ethiopia, Ghana and Burkina," *International Journal* XLT, 4 (1986).
- ⁸See studies of these regimes along Marxist lines in a special issue of the *Journal of Communist Studies* No. 3/4 (1985).
- ⁹Morris Janowitz, *The Military in the Political Development of New States: An Essay in Comparative Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 63-68.
- ¹⁰Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt 1960 – 1967* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 131 – 144.
- ¹¹A. Thomson, *An Introduction to African Politics*. 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge TAYLOR, 2004), 134. R. A. Diker, *Public Management and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Military and Bureaucracy Relationship* (London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 102.
- ¹²Hutchful, *Military and Militarism in Africa*, 1.
- ¹³Ajisola Ewuola, *Military Intervention in Nigeria Politics: Searchlight on the Nigerian Army from January 15, 1966 to May 29, 1999* (Calabar, Nigeria: Ajis-ajat International Company, 2010), 131.
- ¹⁴Ibiang Oden Ewa, "The Military and Governance in Nigeria: A Political Perspective," *Ibom Journal of History and International Studies*. Vol 14 (2013):105-127.
- ¹⁵Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria*. 8th Ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), 16.
- ¹⁶Ibiang Oden Ewa, "Ethnic Imbalance in the Nigerian Army: The Missing Antecedents," *Journal of Defence Studies* Vol. 18, (March, 2013): 77-79.

- ¹⁷Of Nigeria's independent army, a British officer, who served in Nigeria, complained: "Greed, self-interest and tribalism quickly took over. Private armies sprang up within the army and the nation quickly disintegrated ..." See R.H.L.O., R.W.A.F.F., MSS. Afr. s.1734. R.H.L.O, MSS. Afr. s.1734, Box 11, (371), 1957-60, Rev. Gerard T.N. Solomon, private paper, 1984.
- ¹⁸Ibiang Oden Ewa, "The Politicisation of the Nigerian Military 1960-1965," *Journal of African Politics and Society* Vol.2 No.1 (June, 2013):115.
- ¹⁹N. J. Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956-1966* (London: Methuen, 1971), 97.
- ²⁰Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Evans Brothers, 1981), 23-24.
- ²¹This observation was made at that time by the B.B.C. and the British press in certain remarks. The B.B.C. portrayed the 15 January, 1966 coup as an Igbo affair. See, for example. Ministry of Information, Republic of Biafra, *The Case of Biafra* (Enugu: Government Printer, 12th June, 1968). 31. *The Daily Telegraph* published the following commentary by Thomas Hughes: "The coup is believed to have been attempted by a group of junior officers of the southern Ibo tribe (whose) sympathies lie largely with Southern-based opposition." See *Daily Telegraph* of 17th January as quoted in A.B. Akinyemi, *The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War: The Godfather Complex* (Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Ltd., (1979), 7-8. A similar observation was also made in an editorial of *The Times*: The ring leaders appear to be from the Ibo tribe, the principal victims, Moslems from the North; the immediate cause was perhaps the explosive dissatisfaction of the Yoruba of the Western Nigeria at rigged elections and

political domination by the Moslem North.” See *The Times* as quoted in *Ibid* of Akinyemi.

- ²²S.O. Arifalo, “The Military in Contemporary African Politics,” in *African History and Culture* ed. Richard Olaniyan (Lagos, Nigeria: Longman, 1982), 153.
- ²³O.E. Udofia, “The Military and Political Development: The Case of Commonwealth West Africa,” *African Development Studies: The Journal of African Development Research Association University of Calabar Nigeria* Vol. No.2 (July, 1977): 78. The ethnic interpretation of the coup *d’ état* of 15 January, 1966 has not diminished; it has continually gained ascendancy. See Chucks Iloegbunam, “Africa’s Bloodiest coup *d’ état*,” *Vanguard (Lagos, Nigeria)*, July 29, 2016: 45.
- ²⁴Adamu Ciroma, “First and Second Republics: Lessons for the Third Republic,” in National Conference, *Stability of the Third Republic* (Lagos: Concord Group of Publications, 1988), 23-24.
- ²⁵ General Garba was an officer in the Nigerian Army at the time of the events. His, therefore, is the view of a *dramatis personae*. See *The African Guardian* (Lagos, Nigeria), January 17, 1988: 81.
- ²⁶ Godwin Agbroko, “Dajuma: Frank to a Fault,” *Newswatch* November 2, 1992:9.
- ²⁷ Cover, “Memories of Mayhem,” *Newswatch* July 7, 1991: 10. *Newswatch* May 7, 1990: 37-38. For other reasons advance by Orkar, see Max Siollun, *Soldiers of Fortune: Nigerian Politics from Buhari to Babangida 1983-1993* (Abuja, Nigeria: Cassava Republic Press, 2013), 148-149.
- ²⁸ There was overt demonstration of discordant interests in the crisis by military officers, some of who indicated readiness to intervene. See Emefiena Ezeani, *In Biafra Africa Died*:

The Diplomatic Plot. 2nd Ed. (London: Veritas Lumen, 2013), 160.

- ²⁹The army officers who planned and executed the coup of 15 January, 1966, did precisely this. One of them, Major Ademoyega, later revealed: "We discussed the political turn of events in Nigeria and unanimously came to the conclusion that the military was likely to be the only solution." See his *Why We Struck*, 25-26.
- ³⁰Quoted in Olusegun Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1987), 99. See also *Newswatch* Vol. 3, No.3 January 20, 1986: 25.
- ³¹Nnamdi Azikiwe, "Democracy with Military Violence," *The Eastern Voice* Issue No.1, June 3-9 1966: 27. This is the text of Azikiwe's Samuel Jereton Mariere Inaugural Memorial Lecture, Collage of Medicine Hall, University of Lagos, Nigeria, 27 October, 1972.
- ³²Adebayo Williams, "National Symptoms," *Newswatch May*, 23, 1988: 4.
- ³³*New Nigeria* (Kanduna, Nigeria), August, 1, 1975:1. *New Nigeria* August 2, 1975:2. *Nigerian Herald* February 15, 1976:4.
- ³⁴Ejitu N. Ota, "Military Involvement in Nigerian Politics: Origin, Causes and Consequences," in *The Military and the State in Nigeria* ed. J. O. Onwuka (Okigwe, Nigeria: Jane-Mass Communications, 2000), 17.
- ³⁵*The Guardian* May 9, 1988:11.
- ³⁶See Major Orkar's broadcast in *Newswatch* May 7, 1990:37-38.
- ³⁷Quoted in Azikiwe, *Democracy*, 27.
- ³⁸Hutchful, *Military and Militarism*, 10.
- ³⁹Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, 33-36.
- ⁴⁰Ezeani, *In Biafra*, 65.
- ⁴¹Cover, "Danjuma on Nigeria," *Newswatch* November 2, 1992:19.

⁴²See *TheNew Horizon* (Lagos, Nigeria) Vol.7, No.1, January, 1987: 3, where the humanitarian posture of the Babangida regime is aptly captured as follows: "The Babangida military group announced on the very first day of grabbing power that it did so to bring back to Nigeria's social and political life the lost human rights. Human Rights has since been the main slogan of the Babangida administration. It has been the sum totality of all those principles which Babangida needed to pursue or camouflage his actions and intentions or to give legitimacy to the coup that installed him.

⁴³*Nigerian Outlook* 4th December, 1965 as quoted in Miners, *Nigerian Army*, 156.

⁴⁴In the case of the Shagari regime, public criticism was sponsored by political opposition, which, having lost out in the 1979 elections, wanted military intervention as an opportunity to start up another fresh competition for power. See J. Bayo Adekanye, "The Politics of the Post-military State in Africa," in *The Political Dilemmas of Military Regimes* eds. Christopher Clapham and George Philip (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 68. Public inspiration is increasingly attracting learned recognition as an important factor in the military *coup d' état*. See, for example, M.J. Dent, "Corrective Government: Military Rule in Perspective," in *Soldiers and Oil: The Political Transformation of Nigeria* ed. Keith Panter-Brick (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 101-102.

⁴⁵Claude Ake, "The Significance of Military Rule," in National Conference, *Stability of Third Republic*, 120.

⁴⁶*Newswatch*: February 27, 1989: 44. *Headlines* (Lagos, Nigeria) February, 1988: 3. *The Guardian* January 17, 1988:132. Generals Foster and Everard, Interviews with the author, U.K., 1988.

- ⁴⁷News, "U.S. takes control of \$480m stolen by Abacha," *The Nation* Saturday, August 9, 2014: 14.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.* See, also, Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, *How the Military Underdeveloped Nigeria* (Calabar, Nigeria: University of Calabar Press, 2010), 102.
- ⁴⁹Willinton U. Bassey, Interview with the author, No. 16 Utang Street, Uyo, Nigeria, 20 August, 1988. Bassey was the second Nigerian to be commissioned into the Nigerian Army, from which he retired as brigadier.
- ⁵⁰See editorial of *The Wish Stream: Journal of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst* Vol.xi, No.2, autumn, 1957.
- ⁵¹Editorial of *Wish Stream* Vol. xi, No.1, Spring, 1960.
- ⁵²Examine, for example, the nature of articles published by Nigerian Army officers and men in *Nigerian Army Magazine* Vol.1.1, No.1, October, 1963 and *Nigerian Army Magazine* Vol.3, December, 1965. The articles generally express officers' interest on issues of bribery and corruption, the Congo political situation, Organisation of African Unity, Commonwealth of Nations, and Sino-Soviet Dispute.
- ⁵³Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, 31. Brigadier W. U. Bassey held the same opinion in his interview with the author, Uyo, Nigeria, 1988.
- ⁵⁴This view is strongly held by T. A. Imobighe. See his "The Disengagement of the Military from Nigerian Politics," paper presented at the National Conference on Political Transition Programme held at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs from 25-27 April, 1988: 3-4.
- ⁵⁵Chukwuma C. C. Osakwe, "Professionalism in the Nigerian Army, 1960-1965," in *Perspectives in African Historical Studies: Essays in Honour of Prof. Chinedu Nwafor Uba* eds. Ojong Echum Tangban and Chukwuma C. C. Osakwe (Kaduna, Nigeria, Nigerian Defence Academy Press, 2013), 78.
- ⁵⁶Osakwe, Professionalism in Nigerian Army, 72.