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## **Ethnic Nationalism in the Nigerian Army: Lessons, Legacies and Prognosis of the First Military Coup d'état, 1966-2015**

By

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### **Abstract**

What we know today as the Nigerian Army emerged from the crucible of the colonial West African Frontier Force (WAFF). The force essentially embraced all the colonial troops in West Africa. With this background, one would have expected a cosmopolitan outlook and orientation for the Army, and by extension, the military in the emerging nation-states bequeathed to the West African peoples by departing colonial masters in the 1960s. For Nigeria, and indeed many other new states in West Africa of the early post-colonial period, however, this was hardly the case. The first military coup d'état in Nigeria came with a high dose of nationalistic and indeed cosmopolitan rhetoric: but preceding events and development soon gave way for the very opposite reality a military that was steeped in ethnicisim, and even sectarianism. Our intention here is to interrogate the forces that made for ethnic nationalistic ethos and proclivity within the ranks and file of the military, which eventually produced and sustained a negative interpretation for a supposedly altruistic and nationalistic intention. The lessons, legacies and prognosis of that epochal event in the political history of Nigeria are analyzed. using the instrumentalist model in the analysis of conflicts in plural African societies.

**Key Words: Ethnic Nationalism, Coup d'etat. The Military, Nigeria. Instrumentalism**

## **Introduction:**

The origin of what is known today as the Nigerian Army is traceable to the diverse local forces raised in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by the British colonial government in Nigeria. The forces referred to above were raised primarily to subjugate local opposition to British penetration and rule in West Africa, and in addition, to serve as an auxiliary force for augmenting imperial forces as a counter against the French during the crucial period of the Anglo-French rivalry in Nigeria.<sup>(1)</sup>

Among these forces, the first was formed in 1862 by Lieutenant R. N. Clover, then the Administrator of Lagos. The force was at its inception known as “Clover’s Hausas”.<sup>(2)</sup> It was also known as “Hausa Militia and lastly, “Lagos Constabulary”. It originally consisted of 40 armed Hausa, but the number later rose to 100. The Clover Hausas comprised of many Hausa slaves who in 1863 had ran away from their masters, and sought the protection of Lt. Clover.<sup>(3)</sup> The force was made to perform both military and police duties until 1895, when a separate body, called the “Hausa Force” was carved out of the Lagos Constabulary and charged, with exclusive military duties.

Following the granting of Charter to the Royal Niger Company in 1886, and subsequent acceptance of the

political responsibility of administering the territory of the then Northern Nigeria, it became increasingly imperative to establish some military presence there, for the protection of British trading interests in Northern Nigeria. This led to the creation of “Royal Niger Company Constabulary” in 1886. This was to form the nucleus of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions, Northern Nigeria Regiment that was created in 1900. This also became the second of the diverse forces mentioned at the beginning of this piece.

The third was raised between 1891 and 1892, by Sir Ralph Moore and was initially called “Oil Rivers Irregulars”. It was however, later, renamed the “Niger Coast Constabulary, and had its headquarters in Calabar. It was to form the nucleus of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of Southern Nigeria Regiment of West African Frontier Force.<sup>(4)</sup>

To give vent to its regional characteristics, other forces were raised from other areas of the West African environment besides Nigeria. We thus, had the “Gold Coast Constabulary”. This was an off-shoot of the Hausa Militia in Lagos, that was deployed in the Ashanti Expedition from 1873 – 1874, and charged with the defence of Fort Elmina.<sup>(5)</sup> There was also the Sierra Leone Frontier Police which was raised in 1890 by Col. Fairclough. This force was indeed

the “pith” of the previous Sierra Leone Police!

It was not until 1897 that Sir Frederick Lugard raised the West African Frontier Force. As S. C. Ukpabi indicated, this appellation for the newly formed force gave rise to a chequered negotiation between the Colonial Office and the War Office; as the newly appointed Colonial Secretary, Mr. Joseph Chamberlain preferred the designation “West African Force”.<sup>(6)</sup> The West African Frontier Force thus, embraced all the colonial troops in West Africa.

After the revocation of its charter in 1900, Lord Lugard combined a fragment of the force of the Royal Niger Company referred to earlier, with the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) to evolve the Northern Nigeria Regiment, while the remaining fragment was amalgamated with the Niger Coast Constabulary to form the Southern Nigeria Regiment.<sup>(7)</sup> Following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914, there was a fusion of all the Nigerian forces. This was then named the Nigeria Regiment of the West African Frontier force.

From the foregoing analysis, it is thus, evident that though we had local armed forces in British West Africa by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all the forces came under the supreme control of the Colonial

Office in Britain. These local armed forces were also subsequently fused, and came to be designated, the West African Frontier Force. Having seen that local armed forces including those of Nigeria comprised the WAFF, how then, and what factors made the emergence of Nigerian Army imperative from the WAFF? Besides, what was the nature of the emergent Nigerian Army in terms of ethnic composition and disposition of its personnel?

### **THE EMERGENCE OF THE NIGERIAN ARMY**

As we have observed, there had grown a body known as the Nigerian Regiment. But it was on 28 December 1922, that an Ordinance constituting the Nigerian Regiment of the West African Frontier Force was promulgated.<sup>(8)</sup> This was the West African Frontier Force (Nigerian Regiment) Ordinance.<sup>(9)</sup> The Ordinance made provisions for order, discipline, government, discharge and service conditions of military personnel. It should thus, be regarded as the foundation of subsequent legislations passed in Nigeria on military affairs. Perhaps, it may be necessary to mention that after Nigeria and the British Cameroons had for reasons of administrative convenience, been amalgamated, pursuant to British Cameroons Administrative Ordinance of 1925, it was expressly provided, “that natives of the British Cameroons shall not be recruited for the force.”<sup>(10)</sup> The provision was

however, abrogated on 3 March 1929, whereby the provisions of the West African Frontier Force (Nigeria Regiment) ordinance were made to apply to the British Cameroons.<sup>(11)</sup>

It would appear that this relaxation became necessary following the liberal interpretation of Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations which allowed the mandatory i.e state with the mandate, to train natives of a territory in military services for police purposes or for the defence of the territory.

On 13 December 1928, the West African Frontier Force, of which the Nigeria Regiment constituted a component, was granted the prefix “Royal” by His Majesty, King George V. This change was immediately given statutory force.<sup>(12)</sup> On 7 June 1956, the Nigeria Regiment which formed part of the Royal West African Frontier Force was renamed Nigerian

Military Force, Royal West African Frontier Force.<sup>(13)</sup>

The inauguration of Nigeria as an independent nation on 1 October 1960, preserved the position and legal status of the British Crown as “Queen of Nigeria”. This in turn ushered in a new name, from the Royal Nigeria Military Forces to Nigerian Military Force.<sup>(14)</sup> The introduction of the Nigerian Republican Constitution in 1963, however, brought in far – reaching legal consequences on the position of the Queen. She ceased to be designated “Queen of Nigeria”, but she remained Head of the Commonwealth, while the erstwhile office of the Governor – General of Nigeria, as Her Majesty’s representative in the Federation of Nigeria changed to President and Head of State of the Federation of Nigeria and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.<sup>(15)</sup> Consequently, the Royal Nigerian Military Forces was thereafter, re-designated the Nigerian Army.

### **THE MAKE UP OF THE NIGERIAN ARMY: ETHNIC COMPOSITION.**

It is evident from our preceding analysis that what we know today as the Nigerian Army had its antecedents in the colonial forces raised by the British in her attempt to pacify and govern the indigenous peoples that came under its control by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In the period before independence, the number of British officers in the Nigerian Military Force was out of all proportion to Nigerian Officers. Out of 250 officers, 15 were Nigerian and the rest British.<sup>(16)</sup> These British expatriate officers were regulars who were seconded from British regiments and deployed to the West African Frontier Force. There was in addition, a considerable number of British non-commissioned officers and warrant officers.

In 1856, there were well over 300 British non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in Nigeria. By 1960, the number had fallen to about 80.<sup>(17)</sup> By March 1964, only about 21 of the NCO's and warrant officers were left. It is observed that there was a predominance of British Officers over their Nigerian counterparts from the origin of the Nigerian Army upto 1960. This was however, to be expected, as the Army within that period was seen as “a lethal instrument at the disposal of the colonial masters: for the effectuation of imperialistic ends”.<sup>(18)</sup>

From 1960, efforts at the “Nigerianization” of the officer corps of the Nigerian Army began. It must be noted that during the pre-independent years, many Nigerians showed very little concern for the military, or for military affairs, generally. The Army appeared to be ignored by many as a foreign institution, with little or no social or political significance. This view of the Army was by no means universal. To the contrary, some Nigerians saw it as a powerful unifying factor for the various peoples of the country. Corroborating this view, Peter Enahoro wrote:

We may have been ruled by the expatriate tax-collectors as one for upwards of fifty years, but in fact the national feeling in this country began in the war years when Southerners met Northerners in the British Army.<sup>(19)</sup>

Apart from the predominance of the British expatriates in the officer corps, the bulk of the soldiers of the Nigeria Army were recruited from the area formally called Northern Nigeria. Thus, for the period 1946 to 1958, the statistics of the recruitment of Nigerian indigenes into the Army showed that about 62.25 percent were constituted of people of Northern Nigeria origin; while 37.5 percent came from Southern Cameroons Eastern and Western Nigeria combined.<sup>(20)</sup> We need to indicate that within this general period also, the percentage of national population census figure for Northern Nigerian was 54.5 as against 45.5 for the rest of the country, including Southern Cameroons.<sup>(21)</sup>

**Table 1:**

	<b>% of Population census</b>	<b>% of Army Recruits</b>
Northern Region	54.5	62.5
Eastern Region	23	23
Western Region	20	11
Southern Cameroon's	2.5	1.5

**Source:** House of Representative Dabates, 7 Feb. 1959 in Achike, P. 212.

The above table represents the situation for the Army as a whole. A breakdown into the office cadre and rank and file shows a different scenario. The majority of senior officers and tradesmen were Easterners, and were dominated by the Igbo, and Ika-Igbo of the then Mid-Western Nigeria. A closer examination of

the numerical strength of officers in 1960 showed about 61.3 percent of the senior officers were Easterners and Ika-Igbo, while the rest of the various ethnic groups in the country comprised the balance.<sup>(22)</sup>

**Table II: Distribution of Officers on Regional Origin, Oct. 1960**

North	West	East	S. CAMEROONS
A.	Ademulegun Shodeinde Adebayo Ogundipe Fajuyi • Nwawo • Okonweze • Trimnell	Bassey Njoku Ekpo Akagha Okafor, D. C. Okafor, D. O. Okoro Brown Ivenso	Malonye
B. Maimalari Kur Muhammed Largema Pam Gowon Katsina Akahan	• Ochei • Ejoor Banjo • Okwechima • Nzefili • Nwajei • Keshi • Nzeogwu	Kurubo Madiebo Anwuna Ogbonnia Eze Unegbe Ezeugbana Chude – Sokei Ude	
C.	Olutoya	Ojukwu	
D.	Obasanjo Igboba Sotomi	Amadi Aniebo	Kweti

**Source:** Achike, P. 214

- With the exception of Ejoor, an Urhobo, these officers were all Ika-Igbo from the Mid-west.

By 1966, when the first military coup d'état took place in Nigeria, the situation was not any different from the table above. In fact, the percentage of Igbo and Ika-Igbo officers had risen to 65, while the rest of the country comprised the balance.

This position was not to remain unchallenged for too long. The need to have what was referred to as “fair proportion of representation of the various ethnic groupings based on population census or region of origin” began to be urged and canvassed from different quarters.<sup>(23)</sup> Coming on the heels of this, the

Northerners began to express some concern about the numerical superiority of Army officers from the Eastern Region, canvassing equal regional representation. The most vocal of the protagonists of this idea, Abdullahi Magajin Musawa made the point vividly in a house of Representative debate:

I am appealing to the Hon. Prime Minister, that we in Nigeria should be united in diversity. I think it would be good idea if we equalize our Army Officer... So that the officers in the Eastern Region, the Northern Region and the Western Region are equalized.<sup>(24)</sup>

To underscore the ethnic consciousness among Nigerians at the time, (even upto now), the Igbo and the Yoruba began to argue that the people of Northern Nigeria origin had dominance in the other ranks. In order to dislodge the imbalance, they strongly urged that enlistment should be made in accordance with certain basic educational qualifications. Thus, they canvassed for enlistment on grounds of merit. It is on record that Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a Northerner, openly accepted recruitment based on qualification.<sup>(25)</sup> But because the Northerners were predominantly illiterate, it was argued in favour of people of Northern Nigeria that recruitment into the Nigerian Army be based on a quota system. As championed by the British, approval was eventually given for recruitment on quota basis: to wit-50% recruitment from the North and 25% each from East and West.<sup>(26)</sup>

This was largely the state of the Nigerian Army at the time of the First Military Coup d'etat in 1966, in Nigeria: an army that was constituted by a disproportionate officer corps of Eastern Igbo and Ika-Igbo, and a rank and file that was clearly dominated by Northerners generally.

### **MANIFESTATION OF ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN THE ARMY FOLLOWING THE 1966 COUP.**

The background to the coup d' etat of 15 January 1966, in Nigeria is fairly well documented in the literatures,<sup>(27)</sup> and needs no elaboration here. We shall thus, proceed to analyze the factors that facilitated the intrusion of ethnic nationalist sentiments into the aftermath of an ostensibly populous

political event. But if we must attain an understanding of this turn of events, some recourse must be made to some aspects of the political atmosphere of the nationalist period that preceded the First Republic. This understanding will be sought and gotten from the rivalry, if not indeed, bad blood that developed between the Igbo and the Yoruba, and by extension the Hausa / Fulani within this general period.

As James S. Coleman has indicated, after British pacification of the area we now call Nigeria, individual Igbo steadily drifted to other areas.<sup>(28)</sup> So heavy was this drifting among the Igbo that during the forty year period 1911 – 1951, the number of Igbo people in Lagos increased from 264 to 26,000.<sup>(29)</sup> In the northern areas, there were less than 3,000 Igbo in 1921, and nearly 12,000 by 1931. But by 1951, the number had increased to more than 120,000.<sup>(30)</sup>

The significance of these figures tended to derive from the fact that the Igbo immigrants gravitated to the urban centres where wage employment could be obtained. In the period following the end of WW II, Igbo clerks, artisans, traders and labourers constituted a sizeable minority group in almost every urban centre of Nigeria. It must further be recalled that the Igbo embraced Western Education with great enthusiasm, and determination. Village Improvement Unions sponsored scholarships, and Igbo students flocked to secondary schools set up by the missions not only in the Igbo environment, but also more significantly for our analysis here, in what was then the Western Region.

By the late 1930's, the Igbo were more heavily represented than any other group or ethnic nationality in Nigeria in the Yaba Higher College, and in most other Nigerian secondary schools.<sup>(31)</sup> Consequent

upon this, among other factors, the number of Igbo appointed to the African Civil Service and as clerks in business firms increased at a faster rate than that of any other group in Nigeria. By 1945, as indicated by Coleman, the gap between the Yoruba and the Igbo in terms of acquisition of Western education, and the consequent social mobility, was virtually closed. Apart from the fact that by 1952, the number of Igbo enrolled at University College, Ibadan (115), nearly equated the number of Yoruba (118); the influx of the Igbo into the towns of the West and the North with their rapid educational development credentials, made them effective competitors for jobs and other professional opportunities and positions.

Besides these socio-economic pre-dispositions of the Igbo, and their compatriots in colonial Nigeria, it will also be observed that on the political scene, the Igbo also stood out with distinctive feature and characteristics. At the outset of the nationalist era, it is to be noted that the Igbo overwhelmingly predominated in both the leadership and mass membership of the NCNC, the Zikist Movement and the national church.<sup>(32)</sup> Post-war radical and militant nationalism, which emphasized the national unity of Nigeria as a transcendent imperative, was largely, an Igbo endeavour. Nnamdi Azikiwe's leadership provide another



explanation for the inclination of the Igbo towards a more emphatic nationalism.

It is seen that of the three major groups in Nigeria, the Igbo had historical and environmental justification for a militant protest against the existing order. The anti-British nationalism of the Igbo appeared to be an extension of their competitive struggle within Nigeria. The powerful urge for progress and self-transformation which drove them to assert themselves in the affairs of Nigeria, was in effect the same that drove them on to take the lead in early postwar nationalism.

Moreover, Igbo political system gave great latitude to youth. An enterprising, talented young man who acquired wealth could attain political power, even over his elders. In these contexts, Igbo culture differed markedly from both Yoruba and Hausa cultures; which placed a great value on age and ascribed status. In contrast to most educated Hausa and Yoruba, the educated Igbo in the immediate post-war period was more attracted to pan-Nigerian objectives. As Coleman once again points out, Azikiwe's own tendency to define nationalism in pan-Nigerian and pan-African terms was communicated to his large Igbo following.<sup>(33)</sup>

This following was to quickly translate to some disdain or hatred for the group, as well as to the

person of Nnamdi Azikiwe. It is noted that some Yoruba and Hausa resented Azikiwe and his associates because they felt he threatened their positions and challenged their own aspirations for leadership. Subsequently, the Igbo as a group tended to become a victim of this resentment, either because Azikiwe was an Igbo or because they were his principal supporters. This was largely the scenario in Nigeria as the First Republic dawned following independence in 1960. The coup of 15 January 1966, may not have had the imprint of Nnamdi Azikiwe, but because of the personnel involved, the nature of executions and its general aftermath, the preceding analysis with regard to the Igbo in national politics came to play a most disquieting role. It is to these development that we turn presently.

## **THE COUP D'ETAT OF 15 JANUARY 1966 AND ITS AFTERMATH.**

The seeds of the events of 15 January 1966, which have gone down in history as the first military coup d'état in Nigeria, lay in the Federal elections that followed independence in 1960. In the period preceding the coup, and the subsequent civil war, Nigeria had three main regionally – based dominant political parties, vying for political power in the regions and at the centre—the Northern People Congress (NPC), in the North, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, later National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the East and the Western region based Action Group (AG). Some minor parties also existed, and were active in some parts of the country – the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC).

The NPC was headed by Sir Ahmadu Bello, who was also Sarduana of Sokoto and Premier of Northern Nigeria. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, President of Nigeria's First Republic, was leader of the NCNC, while Obafemi Awolowo led the AG. As the politics of the First Republic opened, the AG suffered a dehiscence, whereby the party splintered into two groups. An Akintola-led Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and the Awolowo led mainstream of the party. It was obvious to most

discernible observers that the split of the AG had been orchestrated by the Northern – based NPC. As if to give credence to this suspicion, the NPC moved quickly to merge with the Akintola led NNDP, to form the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA). To try to counter the NNA, the NCNC proceeded to scramble a merger with the Awolowo – led mainstream of the AG, to form the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA).

As the Federal Elections slated for December 1964 approached, two political contraptions – the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) stood side by side to compete for parliamentary seats that would determine which will become the ruling party.

The election eventually held on 30 December 1964, but it came with serious disagreements between the parties and their leadership. The President, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and the Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa appeared headed for a showdown. It will be recalled that the UPGA had called for a postponement of the election on the ground that scores of its supporters had been denied the freedom to run in many sections of the country, especially in the Northern Region. As the NNA refused to succumb to pressure for a postponement, millions of UPGA supporters in the south boycotted the elections.

Despite the boycott however, the election held, with the NNA winning 173 of the 312 seat-House of Representatives.<sup>(34)</sup>

President Nnamdi Azikiwe, leader of the UPGA refused to perform his constitutional duty of authorizing the NNA to form a government, his party having declared that it would not accept any government based on the elections. The party proceeded to call on the President, instead to convene a congress to divide the nation's assets and to dissolve the federation.

By 4 January 1965, the heightened political tension appeared to have been doused. President Azikiwe agreed to appoint a new government to be headed by Prime Minister, Sir, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. The President and the Prime Minister proceeded to reaffirm their confidence in each other and thus, ended the greatest crisis that was to rock the nation since its independence in 1960; or so it seemed.

Nine months later, on 11 October 1965, another crisis engulfed the nation. This time it started in the Western Region, following its regional elections. In a way, this crisis was more or less a continuation of the one of 1964. This is because the Western Regional elections turned out to be a straight fight between the governing party, (NNA) and the Action Group

(AG). This was rather reminiscent of the NNA vs UPGA fight that produced the stallmate of 1964/65. It will be recalled that the NNA had incorporated the splinter group of the AG., Akintola's NNNDP, while the mainstream AG entered into some alliance or merger with the NCNC, to form the UPGA, as we had seen earlier. So the NNA was fighting from a position of strength as the ruling party, while the AG was rather handicapped in that regard, even though it was extremely popular.

For this popularity, observers gave it a good chance of winning the elections despite the "handicap" identified above. Besides, the incarceration of its leader, Obafemi Awolowo, for plotting to overthrow the NPC/NNA government rather than discredit him, made him a martyr in the eyes of millions of his followers who had voted him Premier of the Region some three years back.

When on 14 October 1965, the Regional Electoral Commissioner declared the ruling National Democratic Party of S. L. Akintola victorious, all hell was let loose. The opposition party, the Action Group (AG) announced the formation of a rival government in Ibadan. Violent demonstrations protesting the results of the elections ensued. Between 14 October 1965 and 09 January 1966, a total of about 160 persons were killed in post-election violence in

the Western Region.<sup>(35)</sup> In a report produced on 13 January 1966, and read to the parliament, it was indicated that this followed rioting, killing and looting that paralyzed much of the Western Region following “evidence of widespread vote rigging that returned the ruling regional Nigerian National Democratic Party to power in elections three months ago”.

Much like the 1964 crisis, the crisis in the Western Region split Nigeria into two warring factions. The Premier of the Western Region, Chief S. L. Akintola, had been backed by the Prime Minister, Sir A. T. Balewa, and his powerful (NPC) in an alliance called Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) as we indicated earlier. The Action Group on the other hand, which had been favoured to win the election, had the support of the governments of the Mid-Western and Eastern Region; under the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). So, in effect, the NNA was once again pitted against the UPGA as in 1964.

Unlike the 1964 Scenario however, all overtures for compromise were rebuffed by both parties. While the Action Group insisted on its demand for fresh elections supervised by the Army and the police, instead of politically-appointed electoral officers, Chief Akintola and his protege, Prime Minister Balewa refused all suggestions for a political compromise. For taking this hard-

line position, the Action Group Partisans continued their agitation, albeit in a violent fashion. So, in a move calculated to embarrass the Prime Minister, a rash of rioting, looting and the burning alive of political rivals once again broke out in Lagos on the eve of a meeting in Lagos of leaders of the British Commonwealth to discuss the crisis in Ian Smiths Rhodesia, on Sunday 9 January 1966. Rioting and killings continued during and after the meeting called for Monday 10 January 1966. It was in the midst of this unending crisis and orgy of violence that the Army began to perfect plans to intervene to restore order in the political affairs of the country.

### **THE 15 JANUARY COUP D’ETAT**

On 15 January 1966, units of the Nigerian Army staged a violent take-over of government in Nigeria. Nigerian Prime Minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and the Federal Finance Minister, Chief Okotie Ebo were reported have been kidnapped by units of the Army. The Northern Region Premier and Saduana of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Western Region Premier, Chief Samuel Akintola are reported killed. President of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios, who remained behind in Lagos after the Commonwealth conference is under house arrest, but safe. The President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe is recuperating in a London hospital where he had gone to seek

medical attention prior to the coup; is safe and well.

The coup was masterminded by so-called five majors who were mostly of Igbo extraction.<sup>(36)</sup> It must be noted that the original coup led by the five majors of the Supreme Council of the Revolution, failed. This Council was led by Maj. Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. As indicated earlier, despite the failure of the original coup, it resulted to the assassin nation of prominent political leaders across the Federation, except in the East.<sup>(37)</sup> The coup equally resulted to the emergence of Maj. Gen Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, and Head of the Army, as Head of State.

It must be noted that the overthrow of the civilian regime led by Sir Abukaka Tafawa Balewa was hailed by Nigerians. The Military regime led by Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi was ushered in amidst popular About mid-night on 16 January 1966, the Acting President, Dr. Nwafor A. A.Orizu,<sup>(40)</sup> made a broadcast to the bewildered and expectant nation. The tenor and major ingredient of his speech was succinctly out.

I have tonight  
been advised  
by the  
Council of  
Ministers that  
they had  
come to the

acclaim.<sup>(38)</sup> This was obviously due to the preceding developments that gave rise to the coup, as indicated. As a commentator put it, it was the rigged election in the Western Region of October 1965.<sup>(39)</sup> and the consequent break-down of law and order in that region that precipitated the scheme for military intervention in Nigerian politics.

After this seizure of power, a meeting was held in the evening of 16 January 1966, between the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, Maj. Gen Aguiyi-Ironsi, Commodore Wey, Head of the Nigerian Navy, and the Acting Inspector General of Police, Mallam Kam Salem, and the surviving members of the Federal Cabinet at the Cabinet Office. It was at this meeting that decision was made to hand over the government to the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic.

unanimous  
decision to  
voluntarily  
hand over the  
administratio  
n of the  
country to the  
Armed Forces  
of the  
Republic with  
immediate  
effect.... It is  
my fervent  
hope that the  
new

administration will ensure the peace and stability of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and that all citizens will give them their full cooperation.<sup>(41)</sup>

In responding, and accepting the invitation to head the new military administration, the G.O.C in a unique and consciously-worded broadcast stated:

The Government of the Federation of Nigeria having ceased to function, the Nigeria Armed Forces have been invited to form an interim Military Government for the purpose of maintaining law and order and of maintaining essential services. This invitation has

been accepted, and I. General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, have formally been invested with authority as Head of the Federal Military Government, and Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Forces.<sup>(42)</sup>

Following this acceptance, Army units began to declare loyalty to the Ironsi administration. On January 17, 1966, the Head of the Nigerian Military Government declared that all army units throughout the country had sworn loyalty to the new regime. Other segments of society followed suit. From Ibadan, the capital of the Western Region, the Governor Lt. Col Adekunle Fajuyi issued a strict edict against looting and burning of houses of followers of Former Premier, S. L. Akintola. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) of Prime Minister Balwea held a news conference on 18 January 1966, under the leadership of former Transport

Minister, Zanna Bukar Dipcharima, who pledged loyalty to the Military regime; becoming the last to express support for General Ironsi. Labour Unions and youth groups also backed the coup. The Western Region's Opposition Group leader, Chief Adegbenro also backed Aguiyi Ironsi, calling on all party supporters to stop the rioting and killing in the West.

The West African Pilot, largely echoing the voice and minds of the Eastern Region, summed up its editorial reaction thus:

This great country has every reason to be proud of the Military which has taken over the fumbling feudal and neo-colonialist regime. Today independence, which is said to have been granted by the British five years ago, is really won.<sup>(43)</sup>

By 19 January 1966, Maj. Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi had assumed full control of both the army, and the Nigerian state. The original coup plotters who overthrew the civilian

government of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa had either been killed, arrested or submitted to Gen Ironsi's rule. But as Gen. Ironsi proceeded to set his administration afloat with the formation of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) and Federal Executive Council (FEC) including other promotions and appointments, accusations and counter accusations of favoritism began to make the rounds. Smouldering sentiment of ethnic bias in favour of the Igbo right from the execution of the coup' d'etat to the formation of the new administration began to come to the open. This was the setting of ethnic sentiment and nationalism that quickly became discernible from within the military.

### **ETHNIC NATIONALISM WITHIN THE MILITARY IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE COUP OF 15 JANUARY 1966.**

As Gen. Ironsi proceeded to institute the first military regime in the country, he was convinced that democratic institutions had failed, and that they needed fundamental restructuring if they were to be resuscitated.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that the coup failed, it was perceived as having benefitted mostly the Igbo; as all but one of the original plotters were Igbo, as we indicated earlier. Gen Ironsi who eventually emerged as Supreme Commander and Head

of State was also an Igbo. The promotions made to fill vacancies left behind the coup, and other career exigencies made by the Ironsi regime were quickly adjudged to have favoured mainly the Igbo in the Army, at the expense of Yoruba and Hausa Officers.<sup>(44)</sup> These sentiments began to make deep impressions within the ranks and file of the Army, in spite of the fact that there was no hard evidence to back them up. As this writer has indicated elsewhere,<sup>(45)</sup> a dispassionate observer would have noticed that having originated from within the ranks that it did, the coup could not have helped but be dominated by the Igbo in terms of inspiration and execution. Besides, the subsequent promotions could also not help but disproportionately favour the Igbo officers given the structure of the Nigerian military at the time, as indicated in Table I.

By reason of these allegations, as alluded to above, the Hausa began to plan a counter coup right from the onset of the January 15 events. This predisposition and ethnic reading of events was majorly resonant from within the military, as coming events were to prove. We recall the recriminations that attended the politics of recruitment into the Army. Even though this politics played out within the political class, it had direct bearing on those who eventually got recruited into the Army, especially by the imposed quota system. These were to

constitute the foot soldiers in the coming cataclysm against the Igbo both within the Army, and the outside society in the aftermath of the coup of 15 January 1966.

Besides, it would be recalled that the politics of the First Republic had tended to pitch the Igbo, first, against the conservative North, despite the ill-fated alliance between their regionally-based political parties-NCNC NPC respectively and then against the Yoruba, following the NNA-inspired charge of Igbo domination of Federal power through the “subterfuge” of the UPGA.<sup>(46)</sup> The final straw appeared to be the promulgation of Decree No 34 by the Ironsi regime. Against all advice, Ironsi proceeded to issue Decree No 34 which abolished the Federal structure agreed upon by Nigerians in the 1950’s, unified the Civil Service and Christened the country “Republic of Nigeria”.<sup>(47)</sup> Ironsi and his advisers favoured a Unitary form of government for Nigeria, believing that it would eliminate the problems of regionalism and its attendant ethnicism, which according to their reasoning had constituted a stumbling block to political and economic progress of the country.

Four days after the promulgation of Decree 34, on 28/05/66, demonstrations against the Ironsi regime broke out across the Northern Region. In Kano, seven Igbo people were reportedly killed.



Demonstrations were also reported in Jos and Kaduna. The demonstrations which appeared to be well-coordinated were the first open challenge to the Ironsi regime. The placards in all three demonstrations bore similar messages: “Away with Ironsi”, “Down with Ibo Domination”, and “Back to Federalism”.<sup>(48)</sup> This anti-military sentiment, which quickly turned into anti – Igbo also stemmed from fears that the Igbo, in some league with the Yoruba, intended to isolate the north or Hausa / Fulani. Since, according to this thinking, the north had lagged behind the rest of Nigeria in educational attainments, the chances of Jobs and advancements for northern civil servants, and would be civil servants would be in danger in a unified Civil Service under Lagos control. These and related sentiments of Igbo domination of the country as voiced during the nationalist era and early post colonial period began to stoke more and more violent protest and demonstrations against the Igbo, rather than the military from across the northern region and within civil society, in the period between 28 May and 22 July 1966. Within this period, one report indicated rather graphically that “fresh violence and killings of Ibos have broken out in Northern Nigeria for the second consecutive weekend”. The report continued: “Bands of Hausas began demonstration Saturday against Nigeria’s Military regime then went hunting for Ibos”.<sup>(49)</sup>

Such was the scenario over weeks of violence and blood letting directed at the Igbo and their businesses in Northern Nigeria. At the close of this phase of the crisis, saw the death of about 30,000 Igbo,<sup>(50)</sup> The second phase which involved the military directly then opened. It was in this phase that ethnicity poignantly played out within the military. It is to this phase which ostensibly started from 29 July 1966 that we now turn.

### **ETHNICITY IN THE NIGERIAN MILITARY, 29 JULY 1966 – 27 MAY 1967.**

The events of 29 July 1966 are well-documented, and momentous in the political development of the country. Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi had embarked on a nation-wide familiarization tour planned to afford him an opportunity of meeting and explaining government policy directions to traditional rulers of the four regions. While he was in Ibadan, Western Region, on 28 July 1966, a mutiny broke out, at Abeokuta between two factions in the Army. This led to the death of some officers of Eastern Nigeria origin. At about 9.00am on 29 July 1966, General Ironsi and his host, Lt. Col. Fajuyi, the Military Governor of Western Region, were Kidnapped, and subsequently murdered, by mutinous Northern soldiers led by Theophilus Danjuma.<sup>(51)</sup>

Conflicting theses were advanced as to the motivation of the Army mutiny which some saw it as a revenge for the 15 January coup, in which many non-Igbo were killed,<sup>(52)</sup> the Federal government came out with a different version, and the Eastern Nigeria Government released yet another publication countering that of the Federal Government.<sup>(53)</sup> Developments immediately coming on the heels of the mutiny appeared however, to a vindication of the revenge thesis.

It will be recalled, as we indicated earlier, that the mutiny that eventually culminated into the coup of 29 July 1966, had started as a clash between two factions in the Abeokuta Barracks. These two factions were ostensibly made up Eastern (Igbo), and Northern (Hausa/Fulami) officers. It is reported that as a result of this clash, some officers of Eastern Nigeria origin were killed. This shows that the Hausa officers gained an upper hand in the clash, since no mention is made of Hausa officers casualties. Due to this upper hand, the Hausa officers were then emboldened to proceed with a full-blown coup aimed at overthrowing the Ironsi regime, rather than a mere mutiny. With their triumph, the business of revenge killing had to be carried on a bit further, not just in the Western Region where the coup took place, but across the entire country, except of course the Eastern Region.

As graphically indicated by Ifeanyi Anyabolu:

After dispatching Ironsi and the governor of (SIC) Ibadan, the northern soldiers at Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Ikeja, in Oyo, Ogun, and Lagos states, disarmed the southerners among the guard and seized the armories. They distributed arms and ammunitions among the northern soldiers and began the process of killing on sight any Eastern Region soldiers.<sup>(54)</sup>

Continuing, Anyabolu points out that those soldiers from the Eastern Region who were unfortunate to be captured, suffered terrible cruelties and torture, before being shot. In the

north central city of Kaduna it was reported that:

Eastern Region troops stationed at Rawo barracks in Kaduna State, answered call to assemble on the morning of July 30, 1966, only to find themselves surrounded by northern rebels, the southern soldiers (most Igbo) were massacred on the spot. Their wives and families were raped and tortured before also being killed.<sup>(55)</sup>

The “ethnic cleansing”, agenda of the mutinous northern soldiers was not restricted to military formations, but extended to the entire country as we mentioned earlier. In what may best be described as a self-effusing biography of military life, Godwin Alaba-Isama has given an insightful account of what he describes as “politicisation of the army”.<sup>(56)</sup> It is submitted that what Isama actually

meant is “ethnicisation of the army”. As he indicates, apart from the frantic effort to augment the number of officers of northern Nigerian origin from 8 to Easterners 37 and Westerners 10 by 1 October 1960, ethnicisation also entailed making sure that the rank and file remained completely dominated by the northerners. It is equally observed that by the time of the coup of 29 July 1966, ethnicisation pursued by means of the recruitment quotas had ensured that over one third of Nigeria’s army officers were of Northern Nigeria origin.<sup>(57)</sup> The politicization (ethnicisation) was further pursued by what Isama describes as “uncontrolled killings of Ibos and their look alikes in the north, during and after the July 1966 counter coup”. He paints, a graphic picture, as ostensibly relayed to him by his mother who was travelling in company of families of Ukwuani descent in the immediate aftermath of the July coup:

The bus was stopped at military road block mounted by northern troops between Zaria and Kaduna, during the unrest after the coup. Right in front of my mother, these two Ibo-

look-alike  
families were  
dragged aside  
and shot dead  
right there.<sup>(58)</sup>

This was the situation all across the country, but especially in the north. It culminated into a pogrom against the entire Igbo ethnic stock in Nigeria. The attendant civil war turned out to be the most audacious attempt to exterminate the Igbo ethnic nationality in Nigeria, which has been argued elsewhere, amounted to genocide.<sup>(59)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from our analysis that the crisis that played out in Nigeria from independence in 1960, and culminated in the coup and counter coup of 1966, demonstrated a clear instrumentalist character. As a model of analyzing ethnic conflict in plural African societies, instrumentalism according to Bonny Ibhawoh, is a model that sees ethnicity as mainly a tool in the hands of both the colonial and post-colonial elite in furthering their interests.<sup>(60)</sup> These interests are of course, essentially political. Right from the parliamentary and Western regional elections of the 1960's which inexorably led to the coup d'états of 1966, we see a clearly instrumentalist disposition in the dramatis personae, be it individuals or groups. With regard to the army, it began to play out right from the days of the West African Frontier Force,

and culminated in the politics of the quota system in recruitment. When it was realised that numbers alone, or quota representation may not avail some groups the requisite political dominance desired of the elite of those groups, or that the dominance of other groups threatened some other peoples interest, ethnic cleansing disposition became a welcome instrumentalist strategy. The question is what lessons and legacies have been learnt and or left behind by these momentous events in the annals of the political history of this country?

On the other hand, what is the prognosis of these occurrences as we match into a 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized international system? We are constrained to post a rather negative prognosis. With the Boko Haram saga and the attendant politics of troop deployment to fight it, one is constrained to wonder whether we are not being forced to relive the experiences of the 1960's. Be that as it may, now the aiding lesson of the crisis of 1966 is the futility of separation. The crisis demonstrated beyond every reasonable doubt that Nigeria was not a "mere geographical expression". Those who are canvassing and supporting blood-letting in the name of creating an Islamic Caliphate in Nigeria must understand that nobody can eat his cake and still have it.

## NOTES / REFERENCES

1. See Lugard Papers, Telegram Colonial Office to High Commissioner Cape Town, July 30, 1867, in Okey Achike, *Groundwork of Military Law and Military Rule in Nigeria*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension, 1978, p.6
2. This nomenclature could probably have been chosen because the troops were Hausa by ethnic origin.
3. See Haywood and Clarke, *The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force*, in Achike, cited
4. Haywood and Clarke, cited.
5. E. S. Turner, "Soldier and the Gold Coast", *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, 1936.
6. See S. C. Ukpabi, "The Origins of the WAFF", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1966, pp. 485 – 501.
7. Achike, p.7
8. See Ordinance No 44 of 1916
9. Laws of Nigeria (1923) Vol.5, Cap – 37, or Nigeria Ordinances, 1916, pp 541 – 584.
10. 1926 Supplement to the Laws of Nigeria p. 100, Ordinance No 1 of 1925, (First Schedule of the Ordinance No. 1 of 1925).
11. West African Frontier Force (Nigeria Regiments) (Amendment) Ordinance, 1927, S. I.
12. Ordinance No 39 of 1928 i.e the Royal West African Frontier Force (Nigeria Regiment) (Amendment) Ordinance, 1928.
13. See Nigeria Military Forces (Change of Titles) Ordinance 1956, s. 2.
14. See Royal Nigerian Military Forces Ordinance, 1960, Ordinance No. 26 of 1960.
15. See the Republican Constitution of Nigeria, i.e Act No 20 of 1963, s. 34.
16. Achike, P. 15.
17. See Final Report of the Parliamentary Committee on the Nigerianization of the Federal Public Service (Lagos, 1959), P. 35, in Achike, P. 15.
18. Achike, P. 15.

19. See Daily Times, O March 1966.
20. Achike, P. 16
21. See Table I. Showing Percentages of Army Recruit and Population Census.
22. See Table II: Showing distribution of Officers on Regional Origin, Oct. 1960.
23. See Senate Dabates, 1 May 1965
24. House of Representative Dabates, 14 April 1960, Col. 1252.
25. House of Representatives Debate, 12 August 1959, Col. 1818
26. See N. J Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956 – 1966*, p. 97 in Achike, p. 17.
27. See Oliver Ifeanyi, Anyabolu, *Nigeria: Past to the Present*, Enugu, Classic Public, 2000: Luke Nnaemeka Aneke, *The Untold Story of the Nigeria – Biafra War*, New York, Triumph Publ., 2007, amongst others.
28. James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, Benin City, Broburg and Wistrom, 1958, 1986, p. 332.
29. Coleman, p. 332.
30. Coleman, p. 332
31. Coleman, p. 333
32. With few exception, the Freedom Movement which succeeded the Zickist Movement was an Igbo Group. The National Church membership was almost wholly Igbo. See Coleman, p. 470.
33. Coleman, p. 337.
34. Aneke, pp 5 – 6.
35. Aneke, P. 22.
36. See S. I. Okoro, “Reflections on Igbo Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War; 1967 – 2008”, in U. D. Anyanwu and U. U. Okonkwo (eds), *Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, Owerri, IMSU Press, 2008, P. 208.
37. No satisfactory explanation appears to have been given upto date for the apperant lopsided executions that characterized the coup of 15 January 1966. This may have given rise to the equally apperant ethnicisation of the military in its aftermath.
38. See Achike, p 97, Aneke, pp. 29 – 30.
39. See W. Schwarz, *Nigeria*, 1966; Mackintosh, *Nigerian*

- Government and Politics*, 1967, and Nwankwo and Ifejika, *The Making of a Nation. Biafra*, 1970, for an exhaustive account of the crisis, Achike, P. 96.
40. Dr. Orizu was acting on behalf of the President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who was outside the country for Health reasons.
41. See Government Notice No 147 of 1966: Nigerian Gazette, Lagos, 26 January, 1966, p. 103.
42. Government Notice No. 148 of 1966: Nigerian Gazette, Lagos, 26 January, 1966, p. 103.
43. Culled from New York Times, 18/01/66, in Aneke, pp. 29 – 30.
44. This perception apparently ignored the fact the Gen. Ironsi, an Igbo stopped a so-called Igbo coup that would ostensibly have transferred ultimate power to the ethnic nationality, and more significantly, the Army, as we indicated earlier in this analysis, was at that time composed largely of Igbo officers that should ordinarily benefit from such promotions.
45. See S. I. Okoro, “Reflections on Igbo perspectives”. p. 212.
46. Okoro, p. 212
47. Aneke, pp 36 – 37
48. Aneke, p. 37.
49. Aneke, p. 42.
50. Anyabolu, p. 112.
51. Achike, p. 132.
52. See Walter Schwarz, Nigeria, 1966, p. 711, in Achike, p. 132.
53. For details of these, see *Background Notes on the Nigerian Crisis* (Lagos) Federal Military Information, 1968; Eastern Nigerian Government, “January 1966 – *Before and After*”, in Achike, P. 132.
54. Anyabolu p. 113.
55. Anyabolu, p. 113
56. See, Brig. Gen. Godwin Alabi – Isama, *The Tragedy of Victory: On the Sport Account of the Nigeria – Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre*, Ibadan, Spectrum, 2013, P. 17.
57. Isama, P. 23.
58. Isama, P. 27.
59. S. I. Okoro, “The Tutsi and the Igbo”, A Nexus of

- Genocide in Rwanda and Nigeria, 1959 – 1994”, in D. I. Ajaegbo, K. J. Ani & P. O. Ani (eds) *Perspectives on Igbo History and Culture*, Enugu, Snaap Press, 2015, pp. 189 – 210.
60. See Bonny Ibhawoh, “Beyond Instrumentalism and Constructivism’, Reconceptualising Ethnic Identities in Africa”, Paper Presented at the 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, ABU, Zaria, 25 – 27 October, 2010, p. 1.