

# The Coup d'état and Its Effect on Army Cohesion: The Case of Pre-Civil War Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper discusses problems associated with post-colonial cohesion of African armed forces due to the influence of their colonial orientation and past antecedents. The study focuses on the Nigerian Army and captures the fact that various constructions, conditions and tendencies could either escalate or de-escalate the level of army cohesion depending on the need or otherwise for the system itself to integrate into a larger system. When an army originally has a mandate to protect a colonial system, its orientation might not necessarily change after a transition, which leads to emancipation. The Case of Nigeria saw the problems of initial recruitment into the army, the process was based on needs that required ethnic and regional accumulation in various sectors, and this brought about an inconvenient pattern, which negated unity after independence. The process of Nigerianisation too encouraged regional animosities due to various suspicions of ethno-regional domination.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Army, Colonial Recruitment, Post-Independence Recruitment, Partitioned Cohesion

## 1. Introduction

This work discusses the perspectives, motivations and passions which drove relations of the post-independence Nigerian army up to the execution of the coups d'état of 1966, which overshadowed early post-independence developments in Nigeria. This coup culture, which was mainly blamed on the military could also be blamed on other extraneous factors such as politics and its influence on the army. Some scholars have argued about a politicisation of the army based on the fact that it had within it 'non-professional' officers. These 'non-professionals', mainly university graduates who were commissioned after short service training, had not gone through the conventional Sandhurst or Mons military training schools. Most of them were assumed to be self-willed and had little experience in terms of army doctrine and values. The issues of book ideologies being raised by some of the 'professional' officers and how these 'book men,' a phrase attributed to the late General Hassan Usman Katsina in reference to officers who had a university degree and were seen to be more argumentative than submissive to authority. The 'book men' annoyed the less educationally enthusiastic 'professionals' and this became a serious point of separation. This separation brings us to the crux of the matter on coups d'état in the Nigerian army, a culture initiated by 1966.

### 1.1 The emergence of Nigerianisation

As a result of the growth in educational advantage and exposure after the Second World War, a major shift began to occur, there emerged a demand by Nigerians for access to opportunities and growth in the Nigerian bureaucracy, administration and other systems (Nicolson 1966). Although quite a number of Nigerians had been exposed to Western education and lower administrative responsibilities, most of them were still under the supervision of British administrators, some even with lower qualifications than they had (Barret 1976). By the 1950s most of these aspiring Nigerian officers expected more from the British administration, considering the fact that the signs of independence were rife. Political changes were taking place as local structures began to grow. Also, there was a growing nationalism, which served as a hint to the British colonial government that their time as imperialists was running out (Osaghae 1989). These demands and realisations encouraged the process of Nigerianisation of the bureaucracy. The extraction of these and other political gains by the indigenous political class led to a substantial increase in the political influence of regional blocs. The Nigerianisation policy was necessary in the context of independence, but the educational and professional disparities between the regions converted the policy "from a moderately straight-forward organisational problem into a complex political issue" (Nicolson 1966).<sup>i</sup> With these developments, the Foot Commission was set up by the then Governor General, Sir John Macpherson, to make recommendations regarding Nigerianization. In its recommendations, the Commission pointed out, among other things, the following:

- No non-Nigerian should be employed, unless no suitable and qualified Nigerian was available; and
- at least 325 scholarships were to be made available to train Nigerians for the senior posts, and "special consideration should be given to candidates from the Northern Provinces and other areas where educational facilities were...more backward than elsewhere (Gboyega 1989)."<sup>ii</sup>

Gboyega points out that between 1948 and 1952, the number of Nigerians in the senior civil service rose from 245 to 685, but this was still only 19 per cent of the senior posts.<sup>iii</sup> And even with this achievement, the educational and professional imbalance between the northern and southern states was bound to have an effect on the composition of the various bureaucracies in the country. By 1957 for instance, only a bit over 20 percent of federal civil servants were of northern origin, and that number was even far less when assessing through seniority within the civil service (Osaghae 1989).<sup>iv</sup>

## 1.2 Nigerianisation and Regional Division in the Nigerian Army

The creation of a Nigerian officer corps began in the late 1940s (Ubah 1999). The drive for independence was hot on, the Nigerianisation of the civil service had started; and thus the Colonial army, saw the need for training and commissioning Nigerian officers. Though some verbal references have been made of temporary field commissions during certain campaigns of the Second World War, these were not recorded in official documents. The first commissioned Nigerian officer was W. U. Bassey (1948),<sup>50</sup> J. E. A. Wey, J. T. Aguiyi-Ironsi and S. Ademolegun (1949), R. A. Shodeinde (1950) followed by Maimalari, Lawan, Babafemi, Ogundipe, Adeyinka and Adebayo, all in 1953 (Ubah 1999, 198).

Although most of the commissioned officers were from the south, the reason was obviously because there were few northerners who met the criteria, which were: Having a basic educational qualification, at least secondary, and possibly a reasonable amount of years in service in the army (Ubah 1999).<sup>v</sup> The north had more of non-educated NCOs and thus, by 1949, they had no eligible candidates for officer training. With the later acceptance of young men from secondary school into the military academy in Sandhurst, there came a rush from the north (Ubah 1999, 234-235).<sup>vi</sup>

In the Nigerian Army, Nigerianisation had to be tread on a more cautious path. This was because the army, unlike other bureaucracies thrived on discipline, experience, order and merit. These factors, unlike in the civil service, could not be conveniently tampered with without destroying the fabric of the army. Due to the swift process with which colonial rule terminated, the British colonial office and the Nigerian advocates for full Nigerianisation of the military were very careful on how to go about it. They knew that massive withdrawal of British manpower from the then Queens Own Nigeria Regiment could cripple the army and lead to its disintegration, considering the tendencies which were emerging from the civil service (Garba 1982). There was strong advice against a complete and quick transition to a Nigerianised army, most especially from the British, who most likely saw the disadvantage of their process of building a colonial army, which negated basic principles of unification (Lukham 1967, 167). On the other hand, Ademoyega (1981, 24), one of the participants in the January 15, 1966 coup, alleged that one of the reasons that Nigerianisation of the army was delayed, was because, "... they (the British) suggested to the *Sardauna*/Balewa government that it would take six full years from 1959 to Nigerianize the army completely, and that it was in the interest of NPC (Northern Peoples Congress) oligarchy to agree to the plan. That oligarchy agreed to the plan and did nothing either to hasten the process or alter the plan"<sup>vii</sup>

## 2.0 Further Divisions within the Officer Cadre from 1960

The indigenous officers that started the Nigerian army in 1960 were divided along routes of training. In his categorisation of the Nigerian officer corps, Ademoyega identifies Three unique routes of training and groups of officers that initially built up the Nigerian army at independence.<sup>viii</sup> The first group rose through the ranks: This group consisted largely of Second World War veterans who had, out of hard work and perseverance, risen first as NCOs and had subsequently been given commissions after a period of training. This composed of the first group of Nigerian officers such as Ugboma, Bassey, Ironsi and Ademolegun. These men, who were made officers, were well respected by many for the fact that they were veterans and also due to their experience within the army system. They were also, for the obvious reason of experience and seniority, placed as senior officers (Ademoyega 1981, 27-31).

To some within the army, these officers had great limitations, and these arose from the fact that they were former NCOs and did not have that personality and candour befitting the officer gentleman. By implication, they were slavish, brought up under an intimidating British system comprising primarily of white men, they saw the ideals of the British as somewhat supreme, oblivious of the nature and tendencies of African political and social thought. As Ademoyega (1981, 27-31) further points out, these NCO raised officers scoffed at the complaints by the other officers, of the excesses exhibited by politicians in the early periods of independence. They as the most senior officers, not only stood aloof as the politicians "misbehaved," they were believed to have colluded with them in various ways (Ademoyega 1981, 31).<sup>ix</sup> As explained earlier, the Nigerian NCO status had a political tinge to it due to the fact that they had responsibilities of being the median for both the men and officers. Their men looked up to them for both inspiration and morale, while the colonial officers depended on them for order. As they rose from the ranks, these new officers, still felt the affinity they had for their men, and

for the higher authority, which now rested on the politicians. Therefore, it was conveniently easy for this group of officers to tend towards politics. Another reason for their affinity to politics had to do with their age, which didn't promise them time for extensive growth in the army. By independence for instance, the age gap between Ironsi and Maimalari was quite wide, and these handful of officers were tending towards retirement, therefore, it was possible they felt the need to relate well with the new political class as they were moving out of the system. In their books, Ademoyega and Gbulie, both involved in the January 15<sup>th</sup> coup, complained of the senior officer's complicity with politicians which saw the army involving itself in actions which were not in its purview. Ademoyega bluntly calls them "those who were hand and glove with the politicians," while Gbulie accuses some of them of either tribalism, as in the case of Brigadier Ademulegun, or blind obedience to civilian orders to internal peace operations as with Colonel Pam and the Tiv campaigns (Ademoyega 1981, 27-31; Gbulie 1981, 18-22).<sup>x</sup>

The second group comprised what could be termed as the more professional officers. This group had the privilege of going through three years in Sandhurst Military Academy in the United Kingdom. By British military standards, these officers imbibed the etiquette of the gentleman officer. They, as much as possible, kept away from politics and were not interested in power or status when it did not involve the armed forces (Garba 1982, 50). These officers were observed to hold stronger camaraderie and cohesion compared to the other groups of officers mainly because they trained together much longer than the others. Also, in some cases, they had earlier known each other at the then "Boys School," and this had established the bond which fostered future acquaintance. This group which had people such as, Zakariya Maimalari, Alexander Madiebo and Yakubu Gowon. For Maimalari, in particular, the impression of being the first Sandhurst trained Nigerian officer was deep. Joseph Garba describes the impression they had of Maimalari, being the only Nigerian officer at the military school:

As young and inexperienced as we were, there was no doubt in our minds that he was impressive in every way. He was our hero, our model... One of the things we most admired in him was how he stood up to his British colleagues, both senior and junior -a rare thing on those days, especially for a mere lieutenant (Garba 1982, 52).<sup>xi</sup>

Sandhurst trained officers had that charm, and as Gowon points out, their training made them 'officer gentlemen,' and as Sandhurst graduates, that was what differentiated them from the other officers." (Elaiwu 1981, 47)<sup>xii</sup>

The third group, the short-service officers, or the 'bookmen', which was a term that emerged from the frustration of a Northern officer, Hassan Katsina who found the process of bureaucracy and administrative orderliness of short-service officers very frustrating. In his description of Hassan Katsina's anger, Elaiwu noted how arguments sometimes arose because of either semantics or processes of instruction between the more 'professional' soldiers and the university graduates who had joined the army through short service (Elaiwu 1981, 47-49).<sup>xiii</sup> Apart from that, these graduates usually clumped themselves together, seeing a commonality in their personalities as being both university educated and having military training. This group had the penchant to notice and complain about inconsistencies in either military, bureaucratic and political processes.

These 'bookmen' saw as undemocratic, the behaviours of a number of politicians, most especially in cases where they used security agents in pursuing their personal quests (Gbulie 1981, 25). But these self-willed officers contrasted the more senior and indoctrinated officers who saw submissive loyalty to consigned authority as the chief objective of the army.

### 3.0 The Armed Forces and Politics in Nigeria

Questions have been asked about the Nigerian Army's sudden reversal from a submissive authority, to one growing in its desire to resolve what it saw as the problems of democracy. The question that should be more pertinent is whether these post-independence armies really emerged as nationally patriotic armies, or whether they were just patrimonial *satraps*, trained and bequeathed to these countries as mere symbols of an army? The idea of a *partitioned cohesion*; a situation in which identity groups within the colonial army were subtly separated into units in which it becomes convenient to indoctrinate separately from others. This partitioning, in the case of Nigeria saw the north, being first cosseted for its *martial* peoples, while at later stages the south, showing promise in terms of education, gained prominence in the corps of the NCO and officer cadre (Barrett 1976). This was advantageous under the colonial army, because it allowed them to find a particular function in which to put the various groups as needed at various times and in various ways, without them necessarily crossing each other's paths. This therefore allowed the British to manipulate the divergence of group perceptions to attain fidelity from the different groups in diverse ways. This convenient partitioning encouraged cohesion within groups with commonalities, but did not encourage the collective cohesion required for an army. Independence required these same people within the same army to converge, and because this convergence had never been encouraged, animosities became the predominant features at independence. These animosities were further worsened by the politics of division which pervaded the 'nationalist' agenda's (Amoda 1972).<sup>xiv</sup> It is

evident from narratives such as those of Gbulie (1981; 19-25), that relationships which existed between political leaders and the top brass of the military raised a lot of complaints within some levels of the officer corps, indicating discordant tunes within the army, and also in terms of the new democracy. Whether these allegations were true or not, Gbulie's statements provides evidence of the sentiments which had pervaded the rank and file and the officer cadres of the Nigerian army after independence. Further sentiments would be evidenced after the January 1966 coup, as Garba wrote, when he describes the perception of northern officers and men, of the Ironsi leadership, which to them revolved around an Igbo military and bureaucratic elite relationship (Garba 1982, 57-65).<sup>xv</sup>

The fact that the dynamic relationships within the Nigerian military, which began to form after independence were not the norm of ethnicity and religion but of regional allegiances also indicates the fact that politics had begun to permeate into the army. Although not in a very obvious light, there was a growing indication of political favouritism. These relationships further help to indicate neo-patrimonial tendencies, just like other features which help to explain the coups.

### **3.1 The Problems with Patterns of Recruitment, Ethnicity and the 1966 Events**

The partition created by the colonial army, mainly within the rank and file, during the process of recruitment, raised a lot of issues. The post-independence military was affected by these partitions, as many officers and men felt influenced by the nature of their recruitment into the army. Chukwuma Nzeogwu the leader of the January 15<sup>th</sup> 1966 coup, was an exception. He, as Obasanjo (1978)<sup>xvi</sup> points out in his biography, was a nationalist. In his address during the January 15<sup>th</sup> 1966 coup, he noted that the coup was against:

...our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, the men in the high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent, those that seek to divide the country permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers and VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists...that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds (siollun 2009, 228).

Another person was Major Christian Anuforo, who from a recent release of letters believed to have been correspondences with his wife while he was in prison<sup>xvii</sup> show him taking particular concern of one of his 'boys,' who is referred to as Yakubu,<sup>xviii</sup> a Northerner (Otufodunrin and E. Mgbeahunke 2010, 23-25). Anuforo strikes a unique case similar to Nzeogwu, he not only completed his own part of the coup mission on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1966, but was the only officer amongst those stationed in the South-West at that time, to follow the planned orders of the coup d'état, irrespective of ethnic or regional sentiments. The only Igbo officer, Colonel Unegbe, was killed by Anuforo's squad (Omoigui, 2009).<sup>xix</sup>

For the plotters of the January 15<sup>th</sup> 1966 coup, there have been trumped up allegations of an Igbo coup to purge the nation of Northern leaders. There can never be a certain historically factual detail which will resolve the mystery of the planning and execution of the January 15<sup>th</sup> coup d'état, simply because by the end of the civil war in 1970, most of the key informants, who would have stitched the true pieces of the puzzle, were dead. Nzeogwu himself, who was alleged to be a major mastermind of the coups, was dead. Anuforo, whose western region team inflicted the most damages on the military hierarchy (Garba 1982, 57-60)<sup>xx</sup> died even before the civil war. Most of the true actors of the coup had died before writing their memoirs, or even before verbally detailing the sequence of events as they truly were.

### **3.2 The Colonial Army and the Creation of the North-South Divide**

The drive for cohesion, therefore, for an 'African' British army, would be, in itself, coercive. As seen with the recruitment drives, described by Ubah (1999, 185-235)<sup>xxi</sup> there was not much convenience in the dealings between the British officers and men. In a way, the African men and NCOs, out of fear, tended to deify the British officers, thereby placing them on a racial and ideological pedestal above themselves. Even though evidence of disrespect existed within the colonial army, cases as such were nipped in the bud, and punishments, which were severe in many cases, were served by the African men and NCOs, even when in some cases, the British officers and NCOs were in the wrong (Barrett 1976, 111).<sup>xxii</sup> With the coming in of Nigerian officers into the fold, this respect and reverence was not similarly accorded them. In fact, Luckham describes the "tension" in the relationship between the generally younger and less experienced Nigerian officer, to the older, more experienced NCO, as one which was "...inherent" and "near the surface" (Luckham 1971, 167).<sup>xxiii</sup> The fact that traditionally, an age barrier had always existed in most African societies, thereby dictating status, caused a lot of tension in the initial process of Nigerianisation. Evidence of this lack of reverence and relatively little respect Nigerian men had for their new officers is seen in an event, which Gbulie vividly describes, where a then major, Zakariya Maimalari, upbraided a British NCO, a rare occurrence then, which gave him, as an officer cadet, some sense of pride. However it did not go down well with some Nigerian NCOs and men (Gbulie 1981, 15).<sup>xxiv</sup>

In most cases, rather than not, the relationships between officers had solidarity, Gbulie's description of meetings and discussions seemed to show ethnic and religiously inclined social meetings among the Southerners.



Although there was no clearly visible structures such as those of southern officers among the northern officers and men, mainly because of the north's heterogeneity, and a common umbrella created by the relationship of either Islam or the commonality of Hausa as a *lingua franca*, most northern officers and men maintained a strong bonding between them. This, and the emerging threat the northerners perceived of an educationally advantaged south, encouraged northerners to rally around the few officers they had, at the termination of colonial rule.

Ejiogu, referring to allegations by Ademoyega, posits that:

...northern politicians assumed state power in 1960; they enacted policies that increased the number of northerners in the corps. For instance, they lowered entry qualifications and drastically slashed failure rates in selection tests into the Nigerian Military Training College with the aim of attracting more northern enlistees (Ejiogu 2007, 109).<sup>xxv</sup>

Bali however rejects the notion created by Ademoyega and Gbulie, that he and other northerners, were not competent enough to be in the army officer corps. He points out, that:

...although it would be true that we were influenced and helped by the *Sardauna*, it is absolutely malicious to say that we were less qualified than our southern mates. I trained with southerners, first in Nigeria and in England, and was not found wanting. Although there might have been others found wanting, they were not only from the North (Bali 2009).<sup>xxvi</sup>

Garba, in his *Revolution in Nigeria; Another View*, a reply to Madiebo's *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, reverses these assertions of under qualification by pointing out a salient issue:

At that time (1957), the so called quota system was already in use. My intake of sixty had thirty Northerners and fifteen each from the Eastern and Western regions. The standard educational qualification for admission was Standard VI, and the age of entry was 14. Southern candidates had been pre-selected and arrived in Zaria ready to begin the four-year course. I vividly remember the discovery that of those thirty admitted; nearly twenty were over-qualified educationally and over the required age as well. They were promptly issued railway tickets to return home, but on reflection, the British commandant, Major Cyril Grindley decided not to incur the delays a new selection process would entail. They continued through the course with the rest of us, though they had an obvious head start. We later learned that this had happened before, and it had some important consequences (Garba 1982, 25-26).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Garba points out one of these consequences as the lopsided advantage the southerners had in gaining the greatly desired slots for technical training abroad. Due to the advantage of being over-qualified in relation to their northern counterparts, the Southerners excelled and were by merit chosen to go forward. As Garba (1982, 26) later points out, this encouraged the scorning of the less advantaged northerners by their Southern counterparts.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Quite a number of points of view on how and why the Nigerianisation of the military went about, show the complications of the process. The Boys Company recruitment in Zaria is a case in point. The north cried foul on the recruitment processes of the cadets, and this led to a concerted effort by the colonial government and the then northern government to encourage northern boys to join the military, this is seen in the pursuance of legislators like Nuhu Bamali for the recruitment of northerners. Not just northerners, but specifically Muslim Hausa northerners. The colonial administrators and military officers noted the fact that most of the northerners admitted into the Boys Company were actually Christians, mainly from the minority groups (Luckham 1971, 244).<sup>xxix</sup>

As discussed earlier, the colonialists perceived exposure to Western education as a factor which made the southerners suitable human resource material only after the need for them arose as skilled personnel. They had initially been seen as not malleable to colonial authority as riflemen, part of the problem being, as Lugard pointed out, but their exposure to the West. But later on this exposure influenced their acceptability during the building of an independent Nigerian officer corps. The northern elite did not come to like this turn of events, and this was worsened by the fact that independence was just around the corner, and the northern elite felt an insufficiency in its hold to power without a hold on the hierarchy of the military. As Ejiogu points out;

Spirited efforts by Hausa-Fulani politicians to influence the enlistment of upper Niger school leavers in the 1960s could imply that, irrespective of the predominance of northerners in the rank and file, the politicians were troubled by the sparse presence of northerners in the corps (*sic*). It is no over-statement to argue that when colonialism ended in 1960 the Nigerian army hardly reflected the composition of the envisaged Nigerian supra-national state (Ejiogu 2007, 109).<sup>xxx</sup>

As harshly true as Ejiogu's words are, another truth was that the north was greatly lagging in terms of man-power. By the terminal end of colonialism in the country, the south had virtually taken over most of the civil service, the army's NCO technician cadre and there was a large number in the many growing industries, most especially in the north. An example was Kaduna, most especially the growing textiles industry, which required a lot of technicians. Many Igbo moved to the Kaduna in the late 1940's and 1950's. As a matter of fact, areas in the north such as Jos and Kaduna and even Kano, were very cosmopolitan, with a lot of southerners,

most especially Igbo and Yoruba (Obasanjo 1978, 8-12).<sup>xxxii</sup>

#### 4.0 Conclusion

This work has shown the fact that Nigeria, like quite a number of other Sub-Saharan African countries has had problems with post-colonial cohesion due to the influence of their colonial orientation and past antecedents. The paper also captures the fact that various circumstances could either escalate or de-escalate the level of army cohesion depending on the need or otherwise. The Case of Nigeria saw the problems of initial recruitment into the army, the process was based on needs that required ethnic and regional accumulation in various sectors, and this brought about an inconvenient pattern, which negated unity after independence. The process of Nigerianisation too encouraged regional animosities due to various suspicions of ethno-regional domination. The Nigerian armed forces today have lost that unity of purpose because of an increase in these negative variables as highlighted from the past, as above, which have found their way into the armed forces.

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