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# CONFLICT IMAGES: COLONIAL LEGACY, ETHNICITY, AND CORRUPTION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS, 1960-1966

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## INTRODUCTION

Before the first military coup took place in Nigeria, in January 1966, many outside observers thought that the country epitomised the success of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy in black Africa. There was a government at the centre and an opposition. Yet, when viewed from close quarters, the government was nothing more than an alliance between tribally based parties in the East and the North on the one hand, and a tribally based opposition party in the West, on the other. Later, this marriage of convenience gave way to an alliance between the North and a doubtfully valid government in the West against the East. The major weakness in both situations was the degree of alienation involved, since large sections of the country were virtually excluded from participation in the process of government. Principles, issues, and national interests were usually subordinated to sectional imperatives in specific situations.

Despite these centrifugal tendencies, the urge to surmount regional interests and to construct a national consensus persisted. And although the use of the Federal constitution was abused on some occasions, to aid and abet sectionalism, recourse to it, at crucial moments in Nigeria's turbulent life, normally ensured reluctant **retreat from major catastrophes**. However, when the young Majors struck in January 1966, they destroyed the existing instrument for achieving a national consensus. Ethnicity assumed an added dimension; and the forces that it generated plunged the country, first, to the secession of the East, and, then, to a bitter civil war.

Would the disaster have been averted if Britain, the colonial power, had set about building a nation-state instead of furthering separatist propensities in the country? Or, put in another form, to what extent can Nigeria's post-independence problems be attributed to the political system bequeathed by the British? In this paper, an attempt is made to answer this question and to show the interaction between colonialism, ethnicity, and corruption in Nigerian politics during the period under consideration, that is, 1960 to 1966.

## THE COLONIAL LEGACY

Most African states are socially and politically fragile in the sense that their frontiers, which were the arbitrary products of the colonial scramble for Africa, enclose various ethnic groups, the bonds between which are sometimes tenuous. The most significant of these bonds, as far as the preservation of the state is concerned, is the fact of having undergone the same colonial experience. Historically, Great Britain, the colonial power pursued two different policies. The nature of the colonial

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experience was such that, far from narrowing the differences between the peoples who underwent it, in some respects, it actually widened and deepened these differences<sup>1</sup>.

While the "indirect rule" was for a short while practised in the South and had to be abandoned in the end, it remained the main form of colonial administration in the North<sup>2</sup>. Through it, Britain was able to perpetuate cultural separateness by incorporating traditional political institutions into the colonial system. In the process, separatist tendencies were encouraged. Moreover, since "indirect rule" deliberately preserved the moslem culture and impeded christian missionary influence and modern education, it became a barrier to modernization in the North<sup>3</sup>. The South on the other hand which comprise the Yoruba of the West, the Ibo of the East, and other smaller peoples, was an area in which colonial rule involved a fairly strong westernizing influence, christian missionary effort, and an education fashioned on the English model.

Successive colonial constitutions devised for Nigeria entrenched political power on regional lines. From 1951 to 1958, Britain ensured that half of the seats in the Federal Parliament were allocated to the North. But, in the final independence constitution, this balance of control between South and North was rocked. The House of Representatives, it was laid down, would be elected on the basis of population figures<sup>4</sup>. And since the North had over half of Nigeria's population, and three times the land territory of the other two regions combined, it was thus guaranteed cast-iron political domination of the country.

From the point of view of some Nigerians, particularly those in the South, it was as if the British deliberately did things this way to ensure that only Northerners would continue to rule Nigeria after their departure. Yet, looked at critically, with 56% of Nigeria's population, Britain could hardly be blamed for giving more seats to the North. Besides, it was reasonable to have a constitution that provided for a federal parliament which was to be elected by universal suffrage on a population basis. After all, every federal state in the world follows this practice and though there may be some inequality in the population size of individual constituencies no state pretending to do justice could systematically underrepresent one half of the population on the grounds that they were supposedly more 'backward' than the other half. Nonetheless, one can criticize Britain on at least one major ground, and that is for failing to break up the North into several regions, or, as is fashionable nowadays, states. All the colonial administrations actively encouraged the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) to resist the creation of new regions in the North. The main reason for this is not hard to fathom. The British felt that they had a lot in common with the Hausa - Fulani aristocracy than with the restless and pushful nationalists in the South; because of this, they concluded that their interests in Nigeria would be better protected and fully guarded by the northerners, long after their departure from the country<sup>5</sup>. Clearly, it was in Britain's interests to maintain the monolithic nature of the North and to ensure that the final independence constitution favoured that region. But, as Margery Perham has argued, 'the preponderant size of the North' was bound to prevent 'independent Nigeria from achieving unity'<sup>6</sup>.

Those who held the view that Britain's policy was deliberate found this belief reinforced when, after independence, the Northern-dominated Lagos government became very receptive in its foreign policy towards the West, and the latter showered praises on the Nigerian leadership in the World Press<sup>7</sup>. Agreed, a man like the late **Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, could be regarded as an honest and good** hearted leader, but the direction of his domestic policies, and his attempts to strike a balance between the different interests of the regions, were repeatedly frustrated by the fact that he was also in a subordinate position, in important matters to the late Sardauna of Sokoto, the late premier of the Northern Region. •

## THE DOMESTIC SOURCES OF CONFLICT

The large-scale corruption that started soon after independence was another factor which was at the root of the Nigerian tragedy. The politicians, while their tenure of office lasted, turned the government treasury into a large private gold mine. To remain in office, they used armed thugs to silence opposition, manipulated census figures to ensure better representation for their political parties, and rigged elections with ingenious chicanery. The 1963 census, the 1964 elections to the Federal Parliament, and the October 1965 elections to the Western House of Assembly, exhibited the worst traits of all these evils. The latter incident, which brought total chaos into the West, and the large-scale army intervention in the Tiv region in 1964<sup>8</sup>, were crucial flashpoints for the young officers' coup of January, 1966.

The NPC shared, in no small measure, the responsibility for the sorry state into which things had drifted in the six years of independence. The party wanted to extend the North's hegemony to the Atlantic Ocean and the Sardauna was even unwilling to change its title (from Northern to Nigerian People's Congress) to give it an apparently national character in line with the other major political parties. True, the party had struck an early alliance with the Eastern Region's National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) under Ibo leadership. But this was clearly a marriage of convenience. The NPC outmanouvred its ally along the line. A major rupture came early in the 1963 census crisis, which was blatantly fixed<sup>9</sup>. The crisis had two main direct effects<sup>10</sup>. First, the NPC and the NCNC broke their alliance, thereby bringing about a new political re-alignment among the main parties. Thus while the NPC and its new ally in the South, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), formed the core of the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA), the two main southern parties – the Action Group (AG) and the NCNC – gathered forces under the umbrella of the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) to oppose the North<sup>11</sup>. Secondly, the President, who proved unwilling to accept the purely symbolic role which the NPC apparently wished to assign to him, finally allowed himself to become involved in local politics and polemics. On dissolving Parliament in December 1964 for the then approaching Federal elections, Dr. Azikiwe made a dawn address over the radio in which he issued a very stern warning of the consequences of electoral corruption and thuggery<sup>12</sup>. He closed his message with this dramatic and prophetic appeal:

I have one advice to give to our politicians. If they have decided to destroy our national unity, then they should summon a roundtable conference to decide how our national assets should be divided before they seal their doom by satisfying their lust for office. I make this suggestion because it is better for us.....that we should disintegrate in peace and not in pieces. Should the politicians fail to heed this warning, then I will venture the prediction that the experience of the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>13</sup> will be a child's play if ever it comes to our turn to play such a tragic role<sup>14</sup>.

As the crisis deepened, and an UPGA delegation called on the President to postpone the election in view of the openly scandalous conduct of the campaign, Dr. Azikiwe suggested inviting the United Nations (UN) to supervise a new Federal election, a suggestion flatly rejected by Alhaji Balewa. UPGA then called on its supporters to boycott the election and to 'rally round so that we might save this nation from the forces of tyranny, despotism and feudalism, and from those who now seek to come to power at all costs'.<sup>15</sup> Uneasily, Nigeria went to the polls on 30 December, 1964. The UPGA boycott, announced at the eleventh hour before the elections, swept a huge majority into the hands of the NNA.<sup>16</sup>

The showdown that finally developed between the Prime Minister and Dr. Azikiwe, and the latter's suspected toying with the idea of assuming Presidential control, brought Nigeria to the very edge of major disaster at the beginning of 1965. Dr. Azikiwe was torn between his constitutional duty as President to call upon Alhaji Balewa to form the new government and the pull of his Ibo tribe, and that of his old party, the NCNC, which he had created. After several days of dangerous tension, the President bowed to his moderate and judicial advisers and turned a deaf ear to the demands of his old supporters. He reappointed Alhaji Balewa as Prime Minister, after both of them had accepted a six-point constitutional patchwork recommended by the Chief Justice and the Attorney General of the Federation. These included determining the legality of the elections in constituencies where the number of voters were so small as to 'make a mockery of democracy', a constitutional review commission, and the immediate formation of a 'broad-based national government'.<sup>17</sup> But why, one may ask, did the President suddenly retract his threat not to invite the NPC to form a Government on the basis of this fake General Election? He probably did so out of a spirit of compromise and because he was advised by his legal advisers that he had no *modus operandi* in law and according to the constitution to do otherwise. ~~Let~~ **Let** ~~him~~ **him** ~~invite~~ **invite** the 'victorious' party to power, leaving the defeated party to fight it out in the law courts. Further, it would seem that Dr. Azikiwe also acted out of purely selfish motives, for if there was a head-on-collision between him and the NPC, he was bound in law to lose. The future Biafran leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu, at this stage a Quartermaster-General in Lagos, in fact, foresaw the impasse and wanted to stage a coup at a Lieutenant-Colonel level, which did not come off, partly because Dr. Azikiwe got cold feet. The President knew it would be foolhardy to attempt such a thing when he could not be sure of a sizeable following in the army. For a start, Lt.-Colonels Ejoor and Gowon were opposed to such an idea.

The probability was that many more officers who had not been contacted would be more strongly against it and could even bring about the fall of Dr. Azikiwe were he to persist. As a very shrewd former politician, he took only calculated risks. In any case, Lt.-Colonel Gowon was not only hostile to the plot but he also warned Major General Sir Christopher Welby-Everard, the British General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, about it. The latter took advice from the Chief Justice in good time and he was told that his orders were to come from the Prime Minister and not the President<sup>18</sup>

But the final Act – for which the Western Region provided the stage – in the electoral struggle for power, remained to be played. The Akintola Government had shrewdly used its years in office to destroy the apparatus of Action Group support, and build its own. If the NNDP had to submit to the popular vote, Akintola would obviously be uprooted from office. To remain in office, therefore, he resorted to blatant and unrestricted thuggery and fraud in ‘winning’ the 1965 election. Essentially, the whole exercise was an open rape on democracy:

Electoral officers disappeared or refused to receive the nomination papers of opposition candidates and declared NNDP candidates elected unopposed; other officers had their appointments revoked after they accepted the nomination papers of opposition candidates; ballot papers were widely found in the hands of unauthorized persons on the election day; returning officers refused to declare the result of the poll after the count, enabling false returns to be broadcast from the regional capital, Ibadan; these and many other irregularities took place..... In several constituencies the AG candidate secured a certificate from the returning officer that he had won, but the victory of the NNDP candidates was later announced from Ibadan. The result of this so-called election gave 73 out of 94 seats to the NNDP<sup>19</sup>.

But meanwhile, the regional government had virtually disintegrated, the political violence that had been unleashed as a means of defeating a rival party in elections quickly grew into an uncontrolled and uncontrollable lawlessness.

Before the election, the Prime Minister had threatened to flood the West with troops in the event of violence. Yet, when that violence occurred, the military were only committed in aid of the civil power to a very limited extent. One may well ask why Alhaji Balewa allowed this perversion of electoral law and order. The only possible answer would seem to be that as the Sardauna had remained head of the NPC and had kept all control in his own hands, the Prime Minister was isolated in Lagos and had no power to intervene. At any rate, with the eruption of violence in the West and the massive resentment against an unpopular Government, the Ibadan-based 4th Battalion of the Nigerian Army was inevitably used to prop up the Akintola regime. Many young officers resented this; but despite the fact that the battalion commander, Lt.-Colonel Largema, was publicly exposed for giving clandestine military support to the NNDP<sup>20</sup>, army units and armoured cars were widely deployed in the region. Many of the soldiers and Federal police that were brought in to restore order sympathised quite openly with the AG, as opposed

to the ruling party of the region, the NNDP. Consequently, their presence only added to the tension<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, 'demonstrations against Chief Akintola were becoming increasingly like a guerrilla struggle with UPGA supporters striking suddenly at night to commit arson and to murder prominent members of the NNDP<sup>22</sup>. It was clear to Chief Akintola, and, indeed, to many people, that certain measures would have to be taken to arrest the deteriorating situation. The Government had two options: it could either resign from office or use ruthless force and violence to stamp out opposition. The former was not feasible since Chief Akintola wanted to stamp out opposition. The former was not feasible since Chief Akintola wanted to tough it out<sup>23</sup>. So, on 13 January, 1966, he flew to Kaduna and held a meeting with his chief ally and patron, the Sardauna of Sokoto, on the latter's return from pilgrimage in Mecca.

The precise direction of Northern thinking about this time is hard to discover. Clearly, many, including the Sardauna, wanted to commit the 4th Battalion in the West fully in suppression of violence and UPGA guerrilla action. Possibly they may also have been thinking of attacking the UPGA base in the East,<sup>24</sup> though there is no hard evidence of this one way or the other. There is, however, a considerable amount of evidence that many Northerners were thinking of ditching Akintola, or, rather, kicking him upstairs to some prestigious post, possibly as President in place of Dr. Azikiwe. The spread of the violence in the West and the attacks on the Hausa community in Shagamu and other places had convinced many Northerners that Akintola was not really worth supporting any long since he could not keep the peace and had no clear power base.<sup>25</sup> It may well have been fear of this that induced Akintola to fly to Kaduna to pay court to the Sardauna. On the other hand, the Prime Minister, did not seem to have contemplated the obvious remedy for the crisis — the suspension of Akintola, the imposition of Federal emergency rules, while new elections were held and effort made to reconcile Akintola and the imprisoned leader of the AG, Chief Awolowo, or at least their supporters.

Whatever might have been the official line of thinking in Kaduna, the consensus opinion in the South was that, with the failure of police and spasmodic army operations to stamp out the UPGA opposition, the army was to be thrown into the West for drastic action to keep the Akintola administration in power. This belief was reinforced by the fact that after the talks of Akintola and Lt.-Colonel Largema, with the Sardauna on 14th January, Lt.-Colonel Largema flew to Lagos for discussions at the Army Headquarters. Indeed, it was in the conviction that a larger and more effective military presence was to be organised in the West, that the young Majors finally took action. This is not to suggest, of course, that the plotters executed a coup solely on account of the Kaduna meeting. Far from it, after all, the Nigerian crisis, as we have seen earlier, had long erupted into the open even before the 1965 Western Region election was held. And, in any case, the Special Branch report on the coup has since concluded that it was sometime during August 1965 that:

a small group of army officers, dissatisfied with political developments within the Federation, began to plot in collaboration with some civilians, the overthrow of what was then the Government of the Federation of Nigeria<sup>26</sup>.

## JANUARY 1966: THE FIRST MILITARY COUP

The military coup of January 15th, 1966, was therefore, the culmination of a national crisis in which the former political leadership had forfeited the respect of the Nigerian public for rigging elections, subversion of the principles of constitutional behaviour, large scale embezzlement of public funds, a deplorable display of ethnicity, and, generally, for its oppressive and intolerant measures. The coup was widely regarded as a logical step, and it brought badly needed relief. The military met with a great welcome from those echelons who were dissatisfied with the pace of modernization and nation-building and who were impatient with the widespread corruption of the old order. Initially at least, almost all sections welcomed the change.

The chief plotters were Majors Ifeajuna, Okafor, Anuforo, Chukuka, Onwuatuogwu, Ademoyega, and Nzeogwu. Between them, they killed most of the twenty-seven officers and civilians who died in the coup. Soon afterwards, however, and for a number of reasons, it became clear that the coup had operated selectively. First, only political leaders of Northern origin – Prime Minister Balewa and the Premier of the North, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto – and their most devoted non-Ibo allies in the South – Premier Akintola of the West and the Federal Finance Minister, Chief Okotie-Eboh – had been killed. Second, four out of the five Northern officers above the rank of Major, including the most senior, Brigadier Maimalari, Commander of the 2nd Brigade, were killed<sup>27</sup>. Third, almost all the arch-plotters came from one ethnic group, in fact apart from Major Ademoyega, a Yoruba, the other six Majors were Ibo. Moreover, nineteen of the other twenty-three active participants were also of the same tribe. Lastly, no member of the group came from the North. Not surprisingly, therefore, the January affair soon came to be regarded as an Ibo coup against the North.

But was the coup an Ibo conspiracy to dominate Nigeria? True, most of the plotters were Ibos, but it was quite reasonable that the conspirators should not share their secrets with members of all other ethnic groups. After all, factors like secrecy, ease of communication and group cohesion are usually maximised in a single ethnic group. Besides, the patterns of interaction among military colleagues, particularly those of the same rank, in this case at the Major level, would tend to cluster around ethnic lines. This is because of unconscious similarities in values and outlook among members of the same ethnic group<sup>28</sup>. At any rate, some Yoruba officers were also involved, and one of them has this to say:

As regards the planners, the main movers were Ibos with few Yorubas.....

This was mainly because of capability, trust, and courage to start first<sup>29</sup>..... It would seem that the young Majors were motivated in the first instance by the highest sense of patriotism, a desire to stop their country from sliding into a state of moral decadence and political bankruptcy. As Major Nzeogwu put it:

We wanted to get rid of rotten and corrupt ministers, political parties, trades unions and the whole clumsy apparatus of the Federal system. We wanted to gun down all the bigwigs on our way. This was the only way. We could not afford to let them live if this was to work<sup>30</sup>.



It is a matter of the greatest regret that their original plans laudable as they were misfired. There is no doubt that Major Nzeogwu and the others were idealistic young men, who wanted only the best for their country. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to say that ethnicity played no part in the way the coup was executed. Some of the conspirators found, when it came to the crunch, that their tribal loyalties could not be easily erased. 'The coup.....was not well accomplished because of inability to remove fully tribal considerations and likeness of Ibo personalities'<sup>31</sup> As a result, the actions planned simultaneously for Enugu and Benin were not carried out<sup>32</sup>.

The military government which finally emerged was not that of the radical Majors but that of General Ironsi. His exact role in the coup, and the circumstances in which he assumed power, has always generated a measure of controversy, not least among the writers on the Nigerian scene<sup>33</sup>. Did he 'trick' the rump cabinet to hand over the government to him, or was he 'invited' to assume power? Furthermore, did the rump cabinet ask for British troops to quell the mutiny and thus prevent Ironsi from assuming power? I put these questions to Richard Akinjide. In his reply, he made the following points:

Nobody asked for British troops. The truth is that Ironsi was playing double, he was telling us that he was loyal to us and that he is going to suppress the mutiny; at the same time, he was holding meeting with Ojukwu who has flown down from Kano, where he was in command, and he was agreeing on steps to take over the Government with the mutineers..... The myth of the so-called voluntary handing over is utter nonsense. What Ironsi told us was that we either hand over in disgrace or we hand over in peace. It was real blackmail, it was an ultimatum, it was a coup, pure and simple. He subverted the government, he threatened the rump cabinet that unless they hand over to him, the whole thing was going to be bloody<sup>34</sup>.

This evidence points out one part of the truth. The other factor was that some ministers, especially the Northerners genuinely believed that General Ironsi asked for power as a short-term measure, that is to enable him to restore order and to return political power to them as soon as the task was over. But, of course, he who parts with Alladdin's lamp, even if it is only, for a short time is not likely to see it back again.

At any rate, the situation at that time was hardly conducive to the retention of civilian government. Admittedly, General Ironsi did not reckon with the coup plotters when he first asked to be allowed to bring the situation under control but, in the subsequent negotiations with the ringleaders of the coup, he found he had no choice but to make certain concessions, since Nzeogwu appeared to still have a whole Brigade up in Kaduna under his control or at least a considerable following in the Army. To do otherwise was to court disaster. So he agreed when Nzeogwu insisted that the corrupt and inept politicians already displaced from power should never be allowed to return there. It was, in some measure, a successful coup, in so far as a change of government was effected through violent means, although essentially the coup had failed since the original planners did not quite succeed in getting themselves

into power, where they had hoped to be able to carry out a number of reforms. Thus they were unable to push their revolution to its logical conclusion.

From the very start, the Ironsi regime failed to recognise the need to bargain and compromise with the growing forces of dissent in the North, and neglected to make use of the talents of other groups such as the radical politicians who had previously been excluded from power. The unsatisfactory lack of official action towards the coup-plotters was also an error. Indeed, this was to prove to be Ironsi's undoing: whatever he did with them would offend either the North or the South. If he failed to punish the mutinous majors, he would be seen to have betrayed the North, while if he court-martialled them, it would be argued in the South that he was taking vindictive actions against the heroes of the revolution.

There was no doubt that the series of ill-conceived, ill-motivated, and ill-advised steps taken by Ironsi increased the doubts of many as to his sincerity. The one-sided promotions in the armed forces<sup>35</sup>, the air of arrogant superiority of which Ibos were widely accused by non-Ibos, the caucus of Ibo advisers with which Ironsi surrounded himself<sup>36</sup> and the spate of Government decrees made him and his regime suspect. Bitter inter-tribal strife had been generated by his management of affairs in Lagos and anti-Ibo feeling was exacerbated by the promulgation of the Unification decree<sup>37</sup>. This led in May to disturbances in the North. By mid-July, Northern fears were further strengthened when Ironsi announced, rather precipitately, to appoint military prefects at a provincial level, to post the Military Governors away from their regions of origin, and to rotate the battalions. Each of these decisions would have tightened central control over the regions still further, to the detriment of the North. The situation was not helped by the air of braggadocio being radiated by the Ibo community in the North which revelled in taunting and teasing the Northerners that their time was over. It was now the turn of the Ibos to rule, they contended. These apostles of disorder carried portraits of Nzeogwu sitting in a victorious posture on Ahmadu Bello, thus bitterly wounding the susceptibilities of the Northerners. It soon became obvious that sooner or later, another coup would take place; and indeed it occurred in July 1966.

## JULY 1966: THE COUNTER-COUP

In the second coup, Northern officers aggrieved by the death of their compatriots in January, and fearful of the various measures of General Ironsi, particularly the new dominant position of the Ibos in the military hierarchy, which they thought would perpetuate Ibo dominance, led an attack on the Ibo officers and other ranks. Although the coup was executed by junior officers and NCOs, the plot was hatched by some senior officers, notably Lt.-Colonel Murtala Muhammed, Major Danjuma, and Lt.-Colonel Akahan, with the former NPC politicians, like Alhaji Inuwa Wada, egging them on<sup>38</sup>.

For few days after the coup, there was a power vacuum in Lagos, eventually Lt.-Colonel Gown emerged as the new Head of State. It is generally believed that he knew nothing of the coup until he was sent to Ikeja barracks by Brigadier Ogundipe to parley with the troops<sup>39</sup>. But there the 2nd Battalions' other ranks had taken over

and Gowon was placed under guard on Lt. Colonel Murtala Muhammed's order. As the coup got under way, he emerged as the nominee of the Northern officers as Commander-in-Chief<sup>40</sup>. Obviously, only a Northerner would have been acceptable to the plotters. In fact, they had opted to secede from the rest of Nigeria but were counselled against secession by the British High Commissioner in Lagos, Sir Francis Cummings-Bruce, who pointed out to them that they were now back in power, so why secede into a landlocked North?<sup>41</sup>

With the new political balance fully established, the consensus in favour of secession began to weaken as more and more Northern officers rallied round the idea of a strong and united Federation. In fact, by September, 1966, some cracks had surfaced in the relationship between the far North and the Middle Belt officers. While the former wanted the North to be preserved as one entity, the latter group now began to demand that a number of states be created from the region<sup>42</sup>.

Meanwhile, within three months of the second coup, civilian disturbances and tribal killings, on an unprecedented scale, erupted throughout the country. The initial killings in July were confined to the army. Well over two hundred Ibo officers and other ranks were killed in the North, at Abeokuta and in Lagos. By September, however, hundreds of Ibo soldiers and civilians and even others who could speak neither Yoruba nor Hausa were done to death in cold blood. When news reached the East that there had been killings of Ibos on a large-scale in the North, their instinctive reaction was to retaliate. This act of reprisal was exaggerated by Cotonou Radio and thus resulted in more killings of Ibos in the North. The number of Ibos killed could never be correctly estimated but it must have run into thousands. It was a real pogrom, a massacre, no doubt about it<sup>43</sup>. As dazed refugees streamed to the relative security of their home villages in the East, they brought news of atrocities which quickly transformed a brooding distrust of Northern intentions into an obsessive terror.

**I saw myself in mid September the appalling situation in Gboko and Makurdi when the 4th Battalion, sent by some madmen to relieve the well**

behaved 3rd Battalion in those towns, started a pogrom in alliance with thugs and old NPC cadres and proceeded to assume a self imposed task of driving every Ibo from the North. The Kano and Jos killings were even worse<sup>44</sup>.

Attempts were made to find a constitutional formula that would restore confidence in a Nigerian solution, but the situation had so deteriorated that every move towards a settlement was interpreted as a new form of treachery. So much so, that the more moderate Ibos came to believe that they had nothing to gain from remaining within the Federation; and the more extreme were convinced only secession would enable them to escape cultural and possibly physical extermination. These September and October, massacres, in fact, strengthened the hands of the planners of secession in the East beyond Ojukwu's control; and once he was won over by, he assumed leadership of the Ibos for secession<sup>45</sup>.

On the side of the Federal Military Government, Lt.-Colonel Gowon, though sympathetic to the plight of the Ibos, initially, seemed incapable of halting the gradual drift to the brink. Later on, however, when it was too late in the day, he attempted, without much success, to keep open the possibility of a peaceful settlement. Having failed to achieve reconciliation by the constitution-making exercise<sup>46</sup> which the military had left largely to the political and civil cadres, the two military leaders finally attempted to find a solution through personal telephone contact.

This, too, failed to yield any fruitful dividends, as the camaraderie of the former days in the officers' mess had by now turned sour. Indeed, by late 1966, all the exchanges had become futile. Gradually and steadily, the engine of conflict gathered momentum. The series of crises that followed ensured that Nigeria would not be pulled back from the oncoming disaster. Thus, in May 1967, Lt.-Colonel Ojukwu declared the former Eastern Region a sovereign state of Biafra. And, in retaliation and in an attempt to preserve the territorial integrity of Nigeria, the Federal government took up arms<sup>47</sup>. For thirty months a bitter civil war raged. It was not until January 1970 that Lagos succeeded in bringing the conflict to an end by reuniting the whole country.

## CONCLUSION

Structural imbalance was a source of natural conflict in Nigeria's political system. For one thing, it greatly reduced the basis of stability; and the point came where the weaknesses inherent in the system came to a crisis. Before independence, the extent of the conflict propensity was latent largely because the nationalists were deeply engrossed with, and united in, their central objective of wresting out power from Britain. No sooner did the country attain independence than the areas of dissension surfaced. The situation was worsened by the fact that Britain took no major step to create an integrated society. As was common with all colonial powers, the strategy was to 'divide and rule'. Of course, one can not blame Britain for doing this. After all, and as we have seen, it was not in Britain's interests to work towards an even political development in Nigeria, or, for that matter, to build a fully integrated nation-state.

By choosing regional and administrative units which coincided with major ethnic groups — Hausa — Fulani in the North, Ibo in the East, and Yoruba in the West — Britain strengthened ethnic identification and consciousness. The struggle for power at the centre exacerbated this phenomenon. Political parties were regionally based, and, in very broad terms, were ethnically homogeneous. Initially, the various alliances concluded, gave a semblance of a melting pot. But this notion was quickly shattered, if anything, the alliances aggravated the problem of ethnicity, more so, as party affiliation, and, by implication, ethnic identity was the basis for political participation. Moreover, ethnic identification was also enhanced by the economic competition for amenities among the various Regions. And since every region is dominated by a major ethnic group, economic gains and losses reinforced regional particularism.

Corruption, and the perversion of constitutional and electoral laws provided additional means through which a share in the national cake was ensured. So long as a region was guaranteed a fair share, or what it perceived to be a fair share, it was contented to operate within the existing order. But when the North, the region of the senior coalition partner in the Federal government, found its security, and, so, its own share of the national cake, threatened in July 1966, it struck back. This was also what took place about six months earlier, in January, when Ibo officers intervened to protect, *inter alia*, the interests and security of the Ibos.

I may be challenged, of course, by those who feel that if one is to explore the *real* reasons for the origins of instability in Nigeria, one has to take into account the orthodox yardsticks, advanced by many political scientists over the years, for carrying out this type of survey. These yardsticks usually include: cultural heterogeneity, low regime legitimacy, lack of coercive power, economic backwardness, and structural simplicity<sup>48</sup>. Clearly, I have, in passing, examined most of these factors directly, or indirectly. Furthermore, I can be taken up on the point that ethnic consciousness developed in Nigeria well before the nationalist era. Agreed, the thrust of my argument in this paper is that this consciousness was accentuated not only by British colonial policy but also by the political system that grew out of it. And because ethnicity was thus sharpened and institutionalized, it made the drift – aided by the other factors that we have examined – to instability and chaos much easier.

## Footnotes

1. For a definitive statement of the sources of Nigerian diversity and of their consequences for political development see James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1966). See also the study made by Richard L. Sklar and C.S. Whitaker, 'The Federal Republic of Nigeria', in Gwendolen M. Carter, ed., *National Unity and Regionalism in Eight African States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1966); and B.J. Dudley, *Instability and Political Order: Politics and Crisis in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1973).
2. There were many reasons why the policy failed to make much headway in the South. For instance, Britain's attempts to impose chiefs on the Ibos who, traditionally, had none before, led to much trouble. See Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), Chapters XIII–XVI, and Frederick Lugard, *The Years of Authority* (London: Collins, 1960), Chapter XXIII.
3. Margery Perham criticized Britain on this score. See her *Colonial Sequence, 1949 to 1969* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 352. Note, however, that missionary activity was not totally banned from the North. Yakubu Gowon, for example, is the product of a missionary upbringing in Zaria where his father was evangelist to the CMS mission at Wusasa in the Zaria emirate.
4. Discussions of the historical evolution and details of Nigeria's constitution and main institutions can be found in the following studies: Kalu Ezera, *Constitutional Developments in Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1964); Eme O. Awa, *Federal Government in Nigeria* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964); Olu Odumosu, *The Nigerian Constitution: History and Development* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1963); John P. Mackintosh et al., *Nigerian Government and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), Chapters 1–V, and James O'Connell, 'Political Integration: The Nigerian Case' in A. Hazelwood, ed., *African Integration and Disintegration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).
5. Margery Perham once claimed that 'the confidence and pride of the Emirs' could meet those of the British 'on equal terms.' See her *Colonial Sequence*, p. 310. See also Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt 1960–67* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 208.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 353. Martin Dent also spoke of 'the error of the British in allowing tribalism to be encapsulated in large and important Regional entities, giving rise to Regional parties and Regional polarities. See his article, 'Nigeria: the Task of Conflict Resolution' in *The World Today* (1968), p. 269.
7. Note that before independence, the foreign policy stance of Chief Awolowo, then Premier of the West, was also decidedly and explicitly pro West. Later, after independence and as Leader of the opposition in the Federal parliament he allied himself with more radical elements and criticized Nigerian supineness and pro Western bias in foreign policy.
8. The intervention proved far more successful than the police in restoring order. In the 1960 riots, however, the army did not intervene and the whole operation was carried out by the police. Martin Dent told the author that the police maintained an atmosphere of impartiality and generated forces of political reconciliation. He added: 'We (the administration) and the police relied on trust rather than arms to disarm armed mobs and kept casualties down to about twenty as contrasted with so many thousands in the 1964 riots.'
9. The census of 1963 was blatantly fixed not only by the North but by the other Regions as well. The proof of this is that the final census figures in 1963 gave the Northerners a lower percentage of the total population (54% instead of 56%) than they had under the old colonial census of 1951. In fact, the first abortive census figures of 1962 gave them a much lower rate of increase than that given to the Southerners. It was only when this census was declared invalid by its British census supervisor and a second census ordered, did the Northerners wake up to the need to compete with the other regions and cheat like everybody else.
10. For an account of the census crisis, see Mackintosh, et. al., *Nigerian Government and Politics*, pp. 547–60.

## Ogundadejo—Nigeria Conflict Images

11. Although UPGA was Southern based, it included two most important Northern radical leaders (later to emerge as Federal Commissioners under General Gowon's administration): Aminu Kano and J. S. Tarka. These two had merged their parties in the Northern Progressive Front (NPF) — a party which might well have won a considerable number of seats were it not for the use of patronage and coercion by the ruling NPC to ensure its electoral success.
12. Although the President did not specifically mention the North, as opposed to the East or West, most of the instances referred to were clearly in the Northern Region.
13. Now Zaire.
14. *West African Pilot*, 11 December, 1964.
15. Statement issued by UPGA through the NCNC on 27 December, 1964.
16. The boycott was total in the East, but the elections were occasionally contested in the remaining regions. There were, for instance, 70 'unopposed' candidates in the North. All in all, the NNA gained 198 seats as opposed to only 50 for the UPGA. When the elections in the East were finally held, however, UPGA won most of them.
17. See the *Daily Express*, 6 January 1965. See also K. W. J. Post and Michael Vickers, *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria 1960-65* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 190-218.
18. Robin Luckham has asserted in his book, *The Nigerian Military*, p. 11, that this incident was 'the first known political intrigues within the army'. This is untrue. At my interview with Richard Akinjide, one of the leaders of the banned NNPP and a Cabinet Minister in the last Balewa government, he pointed out that before this plot (of December 1964): There were other attempts in the army to stage a coup. There is incontrovertible evidence of people who were quite prepared to subvert the government or who even called the British GOC and asked for his co-operation. They asked him: 'Suppose we assumed power will you obey us if we give you orders?' Of course, the gentleman refused.
19. N. J. Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956-66* (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 1950-151.
20. See, for example, *Nigerian Tribune*, 16 December, 1965.
21. Note that by the nature of the institutions of security in those days, such as the Regional Security Committee, where the senior military officers sat with the regional Premier, the commander of a unit like Largema for instance, was likely to lean towards the party of the regional Premier in the event of a breakdown of law and order and inter-party conflict. In the case of Largema, however, he was, in addition, very close to the Sardauna and Akintola, the former's client.
22. Miners, *The Nigerian Army*, p. 155.
23. After Chief Akintola's death, a reporter described an interview he had with him in December 1965: "It was clear to me that he would never voluntarily relinquish power, however much violence there was in the region; nor would he consider a coalition with his opponents, which was the only hope of peace." See *West Africa* (1966), p. 93.
24. By stimulating an uprising in the minorities areas of the region. This would provide the Federal government with an excuse for an active intervention by putting the whole region under a state of emergency.
25. For instance, on 10 January 1966, few days before the first military coup, the *New Nigerian*, made the following comment in an editorial entitled 'The North Cannot Sit Back': Facts must be faced..... and the facts are that thousands of people in the West are convinced that the last elections there were not fairly conducted. They remain convinced that Chief Akintola has no right to be in power..... Force is having to be used to prevent the violence in the West from spreading. ... In the North we cannot sit back doing nothing while our kinsmen are being killed in other parts of the Federation.
26. *Military Rebellion of 15th January 1966* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1966). An extract from the full report, is listed as Document No. 1 in A. H. M. Kirk-Greene's *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook, 1966-70* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2 volumes. For fuller extract, see Z. Cervenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1971), pp. 217-253.

27. The remaining three were: Colonel Kuru Mohammed, the Chief of Staff, Army Headquarters; Lt.-Colonel Pam, the Adjutant General; and Lt.-Colonel Largema, Commander of the 4th Battalion, Ibadan. The fifth, Lt.-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, who was listed for assassination, somehow, had a lucky escape.
28. Cf., for instance, F. Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1968), Chapter VII.
29. Letter from Major X.
30. *Daily Times*, 22 January 1966.
31. See note 2 on page 20.
32. Naturally, the Northerners (i.e. the infantrymen) who took part in the coup were disappointed to see that they had been 'tricked' into eliminating just their own men. As we shall see later, this was to provide a major source of discord in July.
33. See, for instance, Luckham, *The Nigerian Military*, Chapter I; and Miners *The Nigerian Army*, Chapter IX.
34. For a corroboration of the fact that the handing over of power to Ironsi was not 'voluntary', see the account of Dr. Taslim Elias, another cabinet minister in the Balewa administration, in *Drum*, June 1972.
35. The promotions were tactless in the extreme since they resulted in Ibo Majors stepping into the dead shoes of the Northern and Western officers that were assassinated in January. This led the Northerners and some Westerners to assume that the killing were for the very purpose of creating vacancies in the promotion ladder for Ibos to fill. While the Ibos promoted did not jump over the heads of Northerners, many Westerners were left out of the exercise. In fact, the only Yoruba promoted was Major Olufemi Olutoye (to Lt.-Colonel). Five other substantive Yoruba Majors – Obasanjo, Sotomi, Adekunle Ayo-Ariyo, and Rotimi – were passed over for promotion. On the other hand, eight Ibo Major were promoted to the level of Lt.-Colonel.
36. These included civilians like Francis Nwokedi and Pius Okigbo; and military officers like Lt.-Colonel Okwechime, Nzeffili, Anwunah, Okoro and Akagha. The latter two, who were unit commanders in the North, were, at one stage, virtually Ironsi's advisers on matters affecting the North. Indeed there were occasions when he even took decisions that affected the North without consulting Lt. Colonel Katsina, the Regional Governor, or Alhaji Akilu, the head of the Northern Civil Service.
37. Decree No. 34. For its full provisions, see Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, Document-No. 25, Vol. 1 pp. 169-173.
38. Cf. Ruth First, *The Barrel of a Gun* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1970), Note that there are ties of kinship between Alhaji Inuwa Wada, the former Federal Minister of Defence, and Lt.-Colonel Murtala Muhammed.
39. In a letter to the author, N.J. Miners argues that 'it was *prima facie* unlikely that Gowon could have done much planning for a coup when he was at Army headquarters and without troops under his direct command'.
40. Ruth first asserted that Lt.-Colonel Gowon was initially a hostage at Ikeja (First, *The Barrel of a Gun*, p. 319); this, however, is incorrect. Martin Dent, for example, told this writer that he gathered from Gowon that 'he definitely: was not a hostage of Murtala. He was detained for his own protection because Northerners were afraid that Ibos would kill him'.
41. Cf. Dent, 'Nigeria: the Task of Conflict Resolution', *op cit.*,
42. One of the major mistakes of General Ironsi was his alienation of the Tiv support. His failure to release the 'political prisoners' convicted during the 1964 riots embittered the Tiv people against him; likewise, his refusal to consider the creation of a Middle Belt state. The alienation was of great importance on the downfall of Ironsi at the hands of Northern soldiers. Rifles were in the hands of the Middle Belters in the Army rather than men of the far (or 'holy') North; but Ironsi, by his tactless handling of the situation created the sense of Northern solidarity in the army which destroyed him.



43. James O'Connell estimated that 'some six to eight thousand persons were killed'. *Genture*, July/August 1969; p. 24.
44. Martin Dent to the author.
45. At the time of the second coup, Lt.-Colonel Ojukwu was the Military Governor of the Eastern Region. He did not take kindly to Lt.-Colonel Gowon's emergence as the new head of state partly because both of them were of almost equal seniority in the army, but more fundamentally, because Lt.-Colonel Gowon was a Northerner. Lt.-Colonel Ojukwu wanted another southerner, Brigadier Ogundipe, a Yoruba and the next in command to General Ironsi, to assume power; but this was not feasible at the time, given the anti-southern stance of the mutinous Northern soldiers. The loss of power at the federal level, and the massacres in the North, both convinced the Ibo leadership that the security of Ibos in other parts of the Federation was in grave danger. With their security thus seen to be threatened, secession eventually became an attractive proposition.
46. This was the Ad Hoc Constitutional Committee. For an account of its deliberations, see K. Panter-Brick, 'From Military Coup to Civil War' in K. Panter-Brick (ed.), *Nigerian Politics and Military Rule: Prelude to the Civil War* (London: Athlone Press (for University of London's Institute of Commonwealth Studies), 1970).
47. Open hostilities broke out between the Federalists and the secessionists on 6 July, 1967.
48. For a recent critique on these points, see Claude Ake, 'Explaining Political Instability in New States' in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Vol. 11 No.3, September 1973, pp. 347-359. See also the same author's article 'Explanatory Notes on the Political Economy of Africa' in *ibid.*, Vol. 14, No. 1, March 1976, pp. 1-23.