

JANUARY 15 1966 COUP D' ETAT RECONSIDERED

Ngozika A. Obi-Ani

Department of History and International Studies,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Paul Obi-Ani

Department of History and International Studies,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Abstract

Nigeria achieved her independence in 1960. Barely five years after, the country experienced political convulsion. The nascent democracy could not be watered for it to survive the test of an election conducted by the new leviathans. Due to these crises, the young Majors intervened with the intention to rescue the country from precipice but their noble and patriotic endeavours were misconstrued as the pattern of killing during the "night of long knives" became clearer. The Igbo ethnic group whose sons played a dominant role in that coup became overnight the villains. Series of massacres were targeted at them culminating in the counter coup of July 1966. Many schools of thought have emerged over this January coup. Some saw it as Igbo agenda to dominate Nigeria; others saw it as a patriotic undertaking by the young Majors while another group perceived it as self-motivated to smooth their career in the military. This paper purports to interrogate and reappraise all these developments for a better understanding of our past. The paper will employ secondary source materials as well as oral interviews and government publications in reconsidering the January 1966 coup d' etat. Giorgio Agamben's theory of state of exception will be applied too.

Introduction

The January 15, 1966 coup d'etat in Nigeria came on the heels of political wrangling, corruption, incompetence on the part of the ruling elite, accusations and counter-accusations of electoral fraud, and the near descent of the country into anarchy. The young Majors (military officers) were initially hailed as messiahs, on a salvage mission to save Nigeria from further political convulsion, nepotism and economic turmoil. Unfortunately, their mission was aborted midstream, their patriotic endeavour misinterpreted while a crown of shame was hoisted on their heads as they suddenly became villains. Since then, propaganda and ethnic sentiments have beclouded a more balanced and fair interpretation of the January 15, 1966 coup d' etat. Was it indeed an Igbo agenda to dominate Nigeria as the Northern propagandists and their imperialist allies attempted to portray it? Were the young Majors hasty and naïve in sacking the political class? Could the political class have made a detour on their path to self-destruction? Would the January 1966 coupists been able to steer Nigeria away from a civil war if they had succeeded in fully taking over the government? So many questions and conjectures stare us in the face. This paper would attempt a reinterpretation of the January 15, 1966 coup d, etat especially as sentiments appear to wane.

Nigerian nationalists struggle to achieve independence from British colonialist bore fruit on October 1, 1960 with the concession of full independence by the British imperialists. Unfortunately the nationalists underrated the problems of nation-building in a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria. The various ethnic groups in the country fiercely sought to take advantage of the departure of the British to enthrone new overlords. The emergent political overlords were intolerant of opposition. Many of

the politicians could not distinguish between state treasury and personal purse. They were high-handed, corrupt and inept. In the three existing regions (Western, Eastern and Northern regions) the parties in power monopolized the state resources and apparatus of office to the total exclusion of opposition parties. Census figures were falsified and manipulated, thereby defeating the statistical value of such exercise. Intimidation of political opponents and occasional outright imprisonment of same were frequent. General elections became mere charade as the party employed all manner of subterfuge to evade submission of nomination forms of opposition candidates thereby returning their members as unopposed. These democratic aberrations resulted in Western regional crises of 1962, the Tiv uprising of 1965, the census controversy of 1962\1963, the Western regional elections of 1964/1965, the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo in the treason trials of 1963 and the aftermath of the 1965 federal election crises when the president reluctantly invited the NPC(Northern People's Congress) to form a government.¹ The political instability occasioned by these undemocratic practices led to the January 15, 1966 coup d'état.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of state exception as propounded by Giorgio Agamben is employed in this research. He developed three concepts namely: bare life, state of exception and *homo sacer*.² In his analysis of the concept of bare life, he used the Jews as a case study. He opined that the Jews simply by the pure fact of their birth became highly politicized by the Nazis. The Nazis portrayed the Jews and then defined them as a people "whose presence (they) can no longer tolerate in anyway"³.

Closely related to the bare life concept is the theory of *homo sacer* (or sacred man)⁴. The central idea to this theory involves a person "who may be killed and not yet sacrificed"⁵. This is because *homo sacer* has been separated politically from the rest of humankind by being defined as lying outside political boundaries. He went further to state that because the *homo sacer* is outside those limits, many things could be done to those humans, including being killed at will by anyone. Furthermore, whoever did this was not committing homicide and could not be convicted of such a crime because *homo sacer* was outside the law and more generally, the polity. Using the Jews again, Agamben made it clear that *homo sacer* is the one who could be killed. *Homo sacer* cannot be sacrificed because perusing through the first definition, he is not part of the political community, and therefore, he or she could not be sacrificed in this traditional sense of the term. Why is such a person 'sacred'? Antonio Negri answered it by saying that he is "sacred in the sense of the assumption of a punishment that separated him from the common."⁶ It is being set apart and being punished that makes *homo sacer* sacred.

However, our major choice for reconsidering the January 15, 1966 coup d'etat will be on the third theory: state of exception. Here again, Agamben uses the Jewish holocaust. He opined that it was the space in which the Jews resides that the Nazi Germany placed them. Because of the existence of such a space, the sovereign power (Hitler) was able to decide on his own who could and would be killed. Since those killed were outside the confines of the law, their murder is not a homicide. Thus, in this context of Nazi Germany and its zone of exclusion, the six million Jews could be murdered without it being considered murder, at least by the Nazis.⁷ The state of exception is unique not only in terms of death but more importantly in terms of life. Thus, today the "overly comatose" person on life-support machine is in a zone of exception wherein it is possible to decide whether the person should live (keep the machine off and in doing so not commit homicide). The latter is crucial for

Agamben because it represents the fact that not just death but life, is now within the state of exception. This gives those in authority power not only over death but increasingly of life. The exception is a kind of exclusion but what is excluded in it is not, absolutely without relation to their rule, the rule applied to the exception is no longer applying in withdrawing from it. The state of exception is therefore devoid of law. It is akin to Hobbesian state of nature wherein life is short, nasty and brutish.

Furthermore, totalitarianism, at least in its modern form, is defined “as the establishment, by means of the state of the exception of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but also of the entire categories of citizens. As it was muted during the Western Nigerian crises that the Balewa led administration had covert ploy to eliminate all political and intellectual adversaries of Western Nigerian origin⁸. The Nazis also created a paradigmatic example of a totalitarian regime, and they used their power not only to murder anyone who opposed them politically but to attempt to eliminate the Jews as an entire category of citizens, not just in Germany but in all Europe. In doing so, the Nazis waged a ‘legal civil war’ against the Jews. That was exactly what the military government led by Gowon made the world to believe in waging war against the Biafrans as an aftermath of January 15, 1966 coup.

Linking this theory further to the January coup of 1966, the mayhem in the country created by the political elites motivated the young Majors who tried to steer the Nigerian ship into a peaceful anchor. The political calculation of the Balewa led government was to deepen the crises in the Western Nigeria thereby subtly wage a war of elimination against the political and intellectual elites of Western Nigeria. Again, with the much touted Igbo coup later on, the other ethnic groups waged a ‘legal civil war’ in which the Eastern Region was unofficially quarantined in a state of exception. Through the July revenge coup, September-October massacres and above all a systematic war of extinction by the federal government, facilitated by the strange and most unusual collaboration and collusion of communism and capitalism to suffocate a people struggling for survival, the first of its kind in world history.⁹ The Federal and Northern Region governments using their sovereign power gave a silent nod to the massacre of the Igbo domiciled in the North. And like the Nazis, gave the Igbo a symbol of “people whose presence (the North) can no longer tolerate in any way”. As the Jews were politicized so was the January coup by other ethnic groups. Owing to the fact that a state of exception is devoid of law, killings of the Igbo were not considered homicide. The Igbo were massacred not only in the July revenge coup but in the pogrom that followed suit. Nobody was prosecuted, convicted nor held responsible. Up until now, none of the actors were indicted by the International Crimes Commission, ICC. No effort has been made to investigate and unearth mass burial of the Igbo who lost their lives during the pogrom. Indeed, the 1966 crisis is likened to state of exception.

Again, Gowon’s failure to implement the Aburi Accord despite its strategic importance set the stage for the civil war. Had Gowon not reneged and Ojukwu more pragmatic, the civil war might not have been and the Igbo may not have been consigned to Agamben’s state of exception in Nigeria and its collateral consequences thereafter.

An Igbo Agenda to Dominate: Propaganda Or Reality?

The January 15, 1966 coup was initially received throughout the country with celebrations. Many people felt that the sacking of the political class was justified due to the inept, corrupt and

amateurish behavior of the politicians. It was indeed a big relief from political thuggery, intimidation, mayhem, and electoral fraud. However, the initial support and enthusiasm for the coup soon started to evaporate when the full details of the casualties became public knowledge. The coup had led to the death of Sir Ahamadu Bello (the premier of Northern region), Alhaji Tafawa Balewa (the Prime Minister) from the Northern region. Chief S.L Akintola, the premier of Western region was executed during the coup. Another prominent politician that also fell in the putsch was Chief Festus Okotie-Ebo, the flamboyant federal finance minister, from the Mid-Western Region.¹⁰ Unfortunately; there was no prominent politician from the Eastern region killed in the military uprising. In an emergent country as Nigeria was then and still is now, the pattern of those executed was viewed from the prism of ethnicity. Nigerians being fed with half-truths and falsehood forgot that the quota system foisted on Nigeria by the receding colonial power made it possible for the North to have more highly placed military personnel. The ring-leaders in the military putsch were mainly from the Igbo ethnic group and the average Nigerian would easily interpret it that they tipped off their eminent politicians such as Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who was abroad on medical check-up while the premier of Eastern Region, Michael Okpara was hosting Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus in Enugu. This sheer coincidence notwithstanding, many Northerners strongly held the view that it was a cruel Igbo plot to wrest power from them. Their view was further heightened by outside media houses and commentators who fueled the speculation of the Igbo plotting to hijack leadership in Nigeria.

This was also strengthened by the cold-blooded murder of top military personnel particularly from the Northerner region. The assassinations of Brigadier Miamalari, Lt. Col Largema, Col. Kur. Mohammed and Lt. Col. Pam all senior northern officers lend credence to a calculated attempt to whittle down the influence of officers from that part of the country in the army.¹¹ Although other officers from other parts of the country were killed during the military mutiny, such as Brigadier Ademulegun, a Yoruba of Western Region and Lt. Col. Unegbe, an Igbo of Mid-West Region the attention was beamed only at the Northern Nigerian loses. The northern school of thought posited that such deaths were accidental or mere camouflage intended to mitigate suspicion over the planned onslaught against them. Besides this, the miraculous escape of Maj-Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi, the Commanding Officer of the Nigerian Army, an Igbo inflamed suspicion of Igbo conspiracy to dominate Nigeria. However, Ironsi was ordered to proceed on leave from mid-January to be relieved by Brigadier Ademulegun¹². As Ademoyega one of the inner caucus wrote that:

it would be recalled that by late 1965 the efforts of the Balewa government to Northernise the top echelon of the army was already bearing fruit. Some Northerners were already holding most of the strategic positions in the Army". Again, he buttressed further that: "there was no plan to arrest or kill all the officers above the rank of Major as was later claimed by extreme Northern propagandists. Even among those earmarked for arrest only four were Northerners, two were Westerners and two were Easterners. But the North had always had more than 50% of the intake of officers into the Army since 1961, and more than 70% of the intake of the other ranks. Therefore, if casualties were to happen, it was more likely to be in that proportion than anything else¹³.

As Nzeogwu and Ademoyega had lamented that their aim was pure patriotism devoid of ethnic sentiments. Ademoyega aptly stated that "the wicked propaganda that followed the coup was only made possible by the weakness and non-revolutionary principles of the Ironsi regime, which had

no semblance to the well ordered and well controlled government that was envisaged and could have been run by us if our plans were fully executed”¹⁴.

Maj-Gen. Aguiyi –Ironsi’s role in aborting the coup d’etat is usually swept under the carpet in a vain attempt to whip up sentiment and heighten the anti-Igbo feeling in the north. Again, it was alleged that Ojukwu told Ironsi to crush the coup. It therefore beats one’s imagination how Ojukwu an Igbo, advised Ironsi another Igbo to crush an Igbo man coup¹⁵. Of recent, Damola Awoyokun wrote in a national daily claiming access to American secret file on January coup and Biafran war. He quoted a Northern military Governor as having described Nzeogwu as a nationalist not a tribalist who acted for the good of all Nigerian¹⁶. One wonders why his noble action was linked to ethnic sentiment. Often such disinformation and brainwashing hardly augur well for ethnic harmony and nation-building in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. However, according to Ademoyega, the initial plan of the Majors was to free Awolowo from Calabar prison and make him their leader. As Mazi Chike Chidolue opined that the best interest of Ndigbo would not and could not have been served by Awolowo, as the new leader of the revolution. Again, if it were an Igbo coup, the arrangement would have been that power would ultimately be handed over to an Igbo man and not Awolowo¹⁷. If it were really an Igbo coup, how come a Yoruba was a member of the inner caucus? His book *Why We Struck* should have been a compass to guide all the ethnic jingoists littered everywhere in Nigeria. As Odia Ofeimun regretted and lamented that *The Forgotten Document of the War* including major Ifeajuna’s account of the coup which did not see the light of day is unhelpful. Mazi Chike Chidolue lamented that Ifeajuna and Nzeogwu being Igbo, their account will not be accepted by most non-Igbo Nigerians because of the Igbo phobia that has poisoned their reasoning¹⁸.

Indeed, this bogey of Igbo domination was as a result of the poor handling of the operations in southern Nigeria by Major Ifeajuna. One of the main regrets of Major Nzeogwu was to be associated with sectional killings during the military uprising. In one of his letters to Olusegun Obasanjo, he lamented thus:

Ifeajuna and my colleagues in the South made such nonsense of this affair with the result that people are accusing us of being one sided.¹⁹

The bungling of the coup plot in the Eastern Region gave the ethnic jingoists the propaganda weapon to latch on and turn the tide against the young revolutionaries. Unfortunately the loyalist troop had no better lesson to teach their “rebel” counterparts. During the May 29, 1966 riots in Northern cities particularly in Kano, Kaduna and Zaria, the Igbo were singled out for massacres. According to John de st .Jorre, “the army stood aside and did nothing²⁰”. Revenge is not a virtue. But that was exactly what the northern aristocracy plotted and executed against defenceless Igbo civilians living in the cities throughout the Northern Region. General Aguiyi-Ironsi’s government appeasement policy emboldened them to take the laws into their hands. On July 29, 1966, the anger of the Northern region boiled over in what was termed the “revenge coup” in which the Igbo military personnel in the armed forces were systematically decimated with Supreme Commander of the armed forces General Ironsi executed. These excesses of the northern injured pride ran out of control degenerating into genocide. Whenever the Hausa-Fulani and their Northern satellites are offended they behave like a bull in a China shop, destroying everything in sight. When would the Igbo avenge the pogrom against them by the Nigerian state? The Igbo are sophisticated, spiritually more matured to senselessly butcher women and children in their sleep. The January 15, 1966 boys botched up a patriotic

undertaking to redirect the ship of state from imminent danger. It was aborted but the danger is still staring us in the face. The coup is still termed as Igbo coup by recent commentators even where the reverse has been the case over the years. The problem is that Nigerians are too sentimental and find it difficult to think rationally.

This propaganda of Igbo agenda to dominate Nigeria after the January 15 coup was orchestrated by the BBC and the Times of London. As Ruth First has observed, it was the BBC that turned the tide on the Nzeogwu coup d'état of January 1966 that had been accepted and celebrated in all parts of Nigeria as an Igbo "coup open to Northern reprisals"²¹. The BBC correspondent had alleged that all the young Majors seemed to be Igbo. The British had never been comfortable whenever power is in the hands of the Igbo "upstart". Hence, like in every other African country, they favored the easily pliant and amenable groups. The imperialist propaganda was further inflamed on January 23, 1966 by the Sunday Times of London editorial entitled, "Can Ironsi Hold Nigeria?" In the words of the Sunday Times editorial:

According to reliable evidence, Major General Aguiyi –Ironsi, Head of the Military Government, has a list of seventy further notables (apart from the Sarduna of Sokoto and the Prime Minister) who have disappeared, largely Northern leaders. Again, Ramadan, the Muslim fast, closes at the end of the month with religious celebrations, which could easily lead to violence. And the Northerners would have plenty of Ibo targets...for, despite Nigeria's sharp geographical divisions, the Ibos, the most adaptable of all the tribes, have spread through the nation as workers, traders and officials.²²

The claim that General Ironsi had a list of seventy more Northern leaders to kill was quite inaccurate but it served the British imperialist interest of inciting one ethnic group against the other in Nigeria. This is in line with the British policy of divide and rule. Again, it served the interest of the Northern elites who gradually excluded the Igbo in a state of exception. Like the Jews, the Igbo were given a symbol, therefore, killing of an Igbo was never a homicide by the Nigerian law rather it became a patriotic endeavor.

Northern Grievances

Any violent overthrow of an elected government is illegal and those responsible are speedily tried and executed for treason. The January 15, 1966 coup d'état was a violent eruption against the government of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Although that government was very undemocratic, the armed forces were not expected to arbitrate in any political crisis but to protect the government of the day. However, those who carry out successful coups and take full control of the government of a country invariably win legitimacy. But those who are involved in an unsuccessful coup bear the full consequences which are normally capital punishment or life sentence. The January 15, 1966 coup however popular and desirable was unsuccessful. Those who took part in the abortive coup were expected to face a military tribunal. Maj-Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi's government rather than apply the law became sentimental. The aggrieved Northern Region that lost the cream of its politicians and military personnels screamed aloud for justice to little avail. The January 15 boys were detained in prison with half salary paid to them. They were treated as heroes instead of villains. The ineptitude of Ironsi's government became discernible as it faltered now and again. One of the ringleaders of the coup, Emmanuel Ifeajuna recognized their predicament thus:

On January 15, the question has been asked by some, whether it was not indiscipline on our part to have taken up the arms entrusted to us without proper command? Yes, it was. But this was indiscipline to cure all cases of indiscipline... we fully realized that to be caught planning, let alone acting on our lines, was high treason. And the penalty for high treason is death. We know we were well aware of our action, and we were aware of the consequences.²³

The Northern emirs had in a secret memorandum sent to Ironsi through the military governor of Northern Region, Major Hassan Kastina articulated their grievances and demanded remedy from the government. They had urged the government to abolish the unification decree 34 which they felt symbolized Southern interference. They also demanded for the trial of the "January Boys" as a test of the government's good faith.²⁴ These demands were not outlandish. In the first place, the unification Decree was ill-conceived and its intent could have been achieved under the unified command structure of the military government, without raising an eyebrow. The summary execution of the January boys did not call for a debate or lobbying by the aggrieved north. That is what any responsible government should have done. Ironsi was a let down. However, the Hausa-Fulani or indeed the Northern Region over reacted when they could not separate the Igbo military men from the Igbo civilians residing in the Northern Region. The Yoruba also suffered high casualty figures during the January 15 uprising. They did not embark on ethnic cleansing, murderous rioting and looting of Igbo property in their area. The exemplary courage of the military Governor of Western Region, Col. Fajuyi, and accepting death rather than betray his guest, General Ironsi, had not received official recognition it deserved.

January 15, 1966: A Patriotic Endeavour Gone Awry

The complete breakdown of law and order in some parts of Nigeria between 1960 and 1966 was a major cause of concern for all patriots and nationalist who were appalled at our inability to manage our affairs shortly after winning freedom from the British. The January 15, 1966 coup had the trappings of a patriotic call to duty by the young majors. Public commentators were swayed by their revulsion of the ineptitude of the political class. But closer scrutiny of the motives of some of the ringleaders in the putsch appeared to be everything but patriotism. The coup was purely a Nigerian enterprise by patriotic citizens. Ndigbo or the Igbo State Union as at the time had no hand in the coup as confirmed by Ademoyega when he stated that:

It was in mid-November 1962 that we held the one and only formal meeting that preceded the coup. The meeting was held in Lagos, in the military quarters of major Ifeajuna. The meeting was very short. There was a consensus that something had to be done quickly to save Nigerian from anarchy and disintegration and to restore peace and unity to the nation. It was agreed that only the use of force should bring immediate end to the violence being perpetrated in many parts of the country. It was therefore agreed that the use of force should be minimal. Political leaders and their collaborators were to be arrested, but whenever an arrest was resisted, it was to be met with force. Otherwise, no one was to be killed. Only the heads of government, that is a prime minister, the four regional premiers and their right hand men, were

considered, most essential to arrest throughout the country. And among their military collaborators, only the top echelon and those holding strategic positions were named for arrest. These included the GOC of the Nigerian army, General Ironsi, the commanders of the two brigades; Brigadiers Ademulegun and Maimalari, the Chief of Staff Army HQ, Colonel Kur Mohammed and the Adjutant General of the army, Lieutenant-Colonel Pam. Others were the deputy commander of the NDA, Colonel Shodeinde, the Quartermaster-general of the army, Lieutenant-colonel Unegbe and the commander of the 4th battalion which was based in Ibadan and was the most politicized unit of the army, lieutenant-colonel Iargema²⁵.

He further affirmed that:

Contrary to the load of wicked propaganda that has since been heaped on us, there was no decision in our meeting to single out any particular ethnic group for elimination or destruction. Our intentions were honorable, our views were national and our goals were idealistic. We intended that the coup should be national in execution so that it would receive national acclamation. We planned that the use of force should be minimal so that our methods could at once be seen as superior to that of the politicians, who simply went on killing the very people they were called upon to govern. The need to bring more of the middle level officers was discussed. But the few names that could be mentioned had to be dropped because their inter personal connections would compromise the security of the planning²⁶.

From the above analysis, one can safely deduce that the fate of the soldiers and politicians arrested in Lagos was determined by the failure of the coup there. The bungled revolution threw the young Majors into a quandary probably, in the ensuing confusion and tension, the arrested politicians and soldiers became a heavy load and were unfortunately shot. However, in spite of what many know as the intention of the five Majors who plotted and executed the January revolution, it is still termed an Igbo coup. Odiá Ofeimun debunks this falsehood when he wrote thus:

Therefore, let me make a clean breast of it; my one great rationale for wanting to see the document "outed" is to help shore up nation-sense among Nigerians by rupturing the culture of falsehoods and silences that have exercised undue hegemony over the issues. I take it as part of a necessary revolt against all the Shenanigans of national coyness and the culture of unspoken taboos that have beclouded and ruined the national discourse. What primes this revolt is, first and foremost, the thought of what could have happened if the forgotten documents had seen the light of the day at the right time. How easy, for instance, would it have been to stamp the January 15, 1966 coup as being merely an Igbo coup if it was known that the original five majors who planned and executed it were minded to release Awolowo from Calabar prison and to make him their leader.²⁷

If the leaders intended from outset to release Awolowo from prison and hand over federal government to him, how then could the January coup still be regarded as an Igbo agenda to dominate. Or could it be that Gowon took a cue from the primary intentions of the young majors and speedily released Awolowo as the first step after acceding to power to gain the support and solidarity of the

Yorubas, thereby making the Igbo a pariah. As Agamben rightly posited using sovereign power to decide on his own who could and would be killed. Thus in this context and its zone of exclusion, thousands of the Igbo were butchered without it being considered, murder or genocide at least by the Gowon led administration. In this state of exception the enclaves harboring the Igbo were therefore devoid of law. The Igbo in other words were separated politically from the rest of other ethnic groups by lying outside the Nigerian political boundaries. As a result of the Igbo being outside those limits, many things could be done to them that cannot be done to other members of the component ethnic groups, including being killed at will by anyone. The war against the Igbo therefore started smoldering right before May 1966 when the Hausa\Fulani hegemonic jihadists who were destabilized by the glorious January revolution launched their campaign of pogrom and genocide against Easterners in general and Igbo in particular and given government sanction when Gowon said that the basis for unity did not exist, which pushed them into widespread ethnic cleansing²⁸.

However, General Olusegun Obasanjo observed that the personal ambition of the executors in the South mixed with vendetta marred the patriotic rhetorics.²⁹ Some of the coup plotters felt that their superior officers were clannish and therefore stalling their promotion prospects in the army. But in the process of Nigerianisation, the various ethnic groups and their high-ranking officers were all guilty of clannishness and ethnic chauvinism. Nevertheless, there were genuine men among the conspirators whose patriotism cannot be faulted. Majors Nzeogwu and Ademoyega felt that Nigeria needed an urgent rescue operation before the political class destroyed it.³⁰ But their co-conspirators' mundane and ethnic considerations marred the success of the venture. Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu was a detribalized Nigerian and the encomium that had continued to pour since his demise testifies to it. In one of his last interviews in May 1967, Nzeogwu condemned the clamour for secession by the East. According to him:

In the first place, secession will be ill-advised, indeed impossible. Even if the East fights a war of secession and wins, it still cannot secede. Personally, I don't like secession and if this country disintegrates, I shall pack my things and go.³¹

Nzeogwu was a nationalist whose interest was embodied in rescuing the nation from drift and politics of divisiveness. He was neither petty nor cruel to project the interest of the Igbo ethnic group nor power hungry for selfish personal aggrandizement. The only non Igbo ringleader of the January 15, Major Ademoyega had continued to maintain the justness of their cause and the patriotic fervor that drove them to change the inept political leadership of the country in 1966. His conviction even after the end of the civil war could not be bought or diluted by officialdom. According to him:

Contrary to the load of wicked propaganda that had since been heaped upon us, there was no decision at our meeting to single out any particular ethnic group for elimination or destruction.³²

Some lily-livered materialist could have over a mere porridge after long years of detention following the civil war embellished and betrayed the young majors through deliberate distortion of facts, but not the strong-willed Major Ademoyega.

Conclusion

The January 15, 1966 coup was a salvage mission that was badly handled ushering in untold consequences to everybody. The political turmoil in the country which the young majors thought could be resolved violently had wide dimension which their experience could not have tackled. Nigeria was a newly independent country facing the hydra-headed problem of nation-building in a multiethnic society. This problem still confronts the country even after over fifty years of independence. It would have tasked the wisdom of the greatest of statesmen the world had ever produced if they had been saddled with the task of running the country.

Unfortunately, after the unsuccessful coup attempt had been crushed, sentiment overwhelmed the Ironsi regime. It is a trite that every mutiny that is not decisively punished in the army breeds more of it. The gallant majors should have been speedily tried after their surrender and executed to mollify the justified anger of the Northerners. The pandering to ethnic and other consideration rocked the foundation of the country. However, the Northerners went too far in their revenge, massacring Igbo civil population in the North from May 1966 degenerating into pogrom in September-October 1966. The Hausa-Fulani ought to evolve a new method of expressing their frustration in Nigerian instead of the recourse to bloodletting. If every ethnic group adopts the penchant of massacring strangers in their midst, then the country will soon be erased from the map of the world. The lessons of January 15, 1966 are obvious to the people. Violence begets violence. The Igbo-Yoruba relations should be strengthened. Col. Fajuyi family should be visited by the Ohanaeze Ndigbo for making the supreme sacrifice in defence of his guest, Maj-Gen Aguiyi-Ironsi. It is rare among men world-over to behold a character as noble as that of Col-Fajuyi, the then Western Region military governor.

General Ironsi was unprepared for the role which fate entrusted to him. However, he was ill-served and ill-advised by some notable Igbo men particularly Francis Nwokedi and Pius Okigbo. In a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, it would be unthinkable to administer it under a unitary form of government. And that was exactly what the obnoxious unification decree 34, was intended to achieve. They allowed Ironsi to promulgate it and attempted to implement it. The northern mobs wrecked havoc at the expense of hundreds of thousands of Igbo lives.

The bitterness engendered by the January 15 putsch is taking time to heal because of poor governance in Nigeria. All the ills appear to have reincarnated: electoral fraud, nepotism, embezzlement of public fund, maladministration. The Boko Haram suicide bombing is another Hausa-Fulani penchant for cold-blooded murder of fellow citizens over little frustrations in life. May the ghost of January 15, 1966 be finally laid to rest and new leadership enthroned that would urgently address the ills of Nigeria.

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