

# GOVON

J. Isawa Elaigwu

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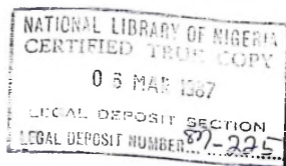


# GOWON

*The Biography of a Soldier—Statesman.*

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This book is dedicated to:  
My Mother,  
*Madam Omeyi Elaigwu*  
who encouraged me to conduct  
the research for this work at a  
time when even the best of  
friends expressed genuine fears  
for my safety

and to

The Memory of My Father,  
*Mr. Stephen Isawa Elaigwu*  
whose advice to me in my child-  
hood days have remained in-  
spiringly verdant in my memory

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## Foreword

This book, *Gowon: The Biography of a Soldier-Statesman*, adds to the stock of publications on the political history of Nigeria in the fluid period 1964-76, of her trials, uncertainty and struggle for survival as a Nation-State. The strength of this book lies in the author's approach. In unravelling the events of this period through political analysis of the activities of Yakubu Gowon rather than a mere catalogue of the roles played by certain individuals in that period.

Yakubu Gowon was called upon to lead Nigeria from the brink of disintegration which was consequent upon a series of coups and the Civil War. Undeterred by the possibility of elimination like his predecessors in office, and determined to build a new Nation free from sectionalism, corruption and drift, he accepted the challenge. In the circumstance of the situation, Nigeria needed a leader with military firmness but who was humane, a leader with a sense of purpose and selfless ambition to build a new Nation-State, and a leader determined to consolidate the integrity of the nation. In other words, Nigeria needed a reconciliator who could mobilize the people to construction, but such mobilization must be predicated by intense moral principles and humanism. Gowon provided this leadership.

Gowon's role was reconciliatory and he restored peace and generated high expectations for the future of Nigeria. Like Abraham Lincoln who fought the American Civil War 'with malice towards none and charity for all', Gowon fought the Nigerian Civil War as a 'police action' and ended it on the note, 'no victor, no vanquished'.

The new Nigeria state later became once again threatened and appeared to be relapsing into its old ills. Gowon then needed more than mere moral example to solve the problems; he needed more than mere humanism to consolidate the peace he had won and the new Nigeria he had built; he needed military force and some charisma to achieve this goal. Unfortunately his method of a blend of militarism and humanism yielded under the stress of corruption, nepotism, etc. perpetrated by his lieutenants. When he could not provide the appropriate leadership of bare faced mobilization, cracks appeared in the system. He was subsequently overthrown in a bloodless coup. Thus Gowon won the Civil War and healed the wounds inflicted on the nation but failed to consolidate the peace.

While in self exile in Britain, he spent his 8 years in reflection as well as studying for degrees in Political Science. This study was to enable him have greater understanding of political underplay in the Nation's body politic. In the course of this self improvement and examination, the militant and aggressive alternative government to his benevolent governmental system fractured and General Murtala Mohammed was assassinated. The motive for his assassination can only be conjectured since all the trials were in camera except for a few releases implicating some personalities including General Gowon. One can guess however that, judging from the way in which Nigerians relapsed readily into the ills of the past in the short period of recent civilian rule, this assassination must have been due to the fact that Nigerians were not sufficiently disciplined or disposed to adjust quickly to the mobilization stance of General Murtala Mohammed.

But why was General Gowon implicated? Did he really have any hand in the plot for the assassination? Would he have had a fair trial? All the answers to these questions are clearly discussed in this book while looking again at the setting; a Nigeria recently emerged from the stupor created by the Civil War. Its immediate post war governance was benevolent in order to heal the wounds. Later, the pattern of government changed to one of coercion and military discipline. An assassination occurred to end this mobilization type government indicating an attempt at a pull-back of the Nation into the reconciliatory and compromising type. Would this setting have made implicating Gowon plausible? Would the panic arising from the setting have treated a Gowon as a scapegoat? Was the stance of the Government in executing suspects after trials in camera meant to re-emphasize its determination to pursue the mobilization type government? These are questions that will be answered as the debate on the history of Nigeria in this period continues.

Consequent upon the assassination, Gowon was declared a fugitive offender by the Military successor. The civilian government headed by President Shehu Shagari reacted positively to Gowon's renewed representation about his innocence. He was subsequently pardoned and could return to Nigeria as a free person. Was this pardon one of magnanimity, or motivated by political consideration to further consolidate the credibility and legitimacy of the government, or by the triumph of truth? Here again the answers are in the womb of time.

Gowon travelled home in December 1983 as a free citizen. But if it is a full pardon, will his rank as General in the Armed Forces, his membership of the Council of State as specified in the Constitution and his benefits on retirement be restored to him? The action of government in these matters will show its position.

Finally, this book should be read without preconceptions. It shows

the effectiveness of the interplay of militarism and humanism; and it shows that the success of a model of governance is dependent upon the setting in the country. It also shows how the character of a man with humility, and a man who controls events through persuasion rather than coercion can shape the course of a nation. Please read this book for inspiration.

E.U. EMOVON  
Vice-Chancellor  
University of Jos  
Jos, Nigeria

## Preface

This work did not start out as a biography. I was really excited, at times perplexed, and yet at other times frustrated by the very dynamics of Nigerian politics and its multidimensional complexities. It is the complex nature of Nigerian society that has created some of its problems and yet has led to the solutions to these problems. My field research in the years 1973-74 gave me a greater insight into the dynamics of the Nigerian society than I ever had before. I began to wonder why many Nigerians kept talking about the necessity for strong leadership while the system worked against the emergence of such strong leadership.

I then resolved that once my Ph.D degree was completed at Stanford University in California, I would turn to this issue of leadership and the Nigerian polity. I was not really sure how I was going to go about the whole exercise then, but I knew I would need another period of field research. My new appointment at Ahmadu Bello University would provide a useful base for me. In addition, as a Nigerian, I could move around quite freely and conduct the research at my pace, and with minimum cost.

Thus on my way to Nigeria from California in September 1975, I wrote a letter in London to General Gowon who had just been overthrown two months earlier. In my letter, I requested an interview with him to enable me write 'your political biography, tentatively entitled - *General Gowon's Nigeria*. My intention is to look at you as a political leader and to see how you responded to the great political crisis and issues from 1966-1975. I would very much like to discuss your personal views on some of the problems you faced while in office and how you resolved, or tried to cope with them.'

I got no reply to this letter which was sent care of the Nigerian High Commission in London. Again, after the Dimka affair, I wrote to Gowon in December 1976. This time a publisher, Mr Keith Ashfield, had become so interested in the project that he encouraged my getting in touch with General Gowon again. In addition, I had got to know most members of his family quite intimately. Again, there was no reply. As General Gowon told me later, he was no longer interested in granting interviews to Nigerians in the light of his experiences with many of them who had abused such opportunities.

Coming after the Dimka affair, I could very well understand his feelings.

I continued with my field research until 1978 when I wrote again. This time I enclosed the outline of the book in a letter to Professor Ishaya Audu who then contacted General Gowon. Both Ishaya Audu and Prof James O'Connell (my former lecturer and later my boss as Head of Department) convinced Gowon about the sincerity of my intention. In addition, Professor Adamu Baikie and Professor O.C. Onazi were very helpful – one giving me General Gowon's phone number, and the other by taking the letters to London.

This was how I got to have access to General Gowon in August 1978. From the first day we met, we hit it off on the right chord and my family has since visited him in London during our various trips. A sunny, friendly and generous host, General Gowon made me feel at home with him in no time. His humility was striking, but at times frightening in the sense that one spoke and joked with him so familiarly, only to remember occasionally that this was a former Head of State. He drove me around the Hadley Wood area in his car and picked me up from the train station so many times, I can no longer keep count.

In spite of all the above, I must say that one remark of Gowon's heightened my respect for him, more than ever. In his advice to me, the General said:

I do not want you to write a book defending my actions while in office. I would like you to tell the *truth* as you see it – no matter how bitter it is. Some day I shall write my memoirs and some details will be disclosed . . .

I was very relieved. I was very glad and yet I was stunned by his lack of bitterness towards those who overthrew him and the depth of his love and commitment to Nigeria – his country.

Why did I choose to write a biography instead of analyzing some of the complexities of the Nigerian political setting by writing on *Nigerian Politics and Government*? Some of my friends often wondered why I chose to write a biography of General Gowon, given the enormous amount of data I had collected over a period of seven years.

My reasons are as follows: First, General Gowon is a great and key personality in Nigerian political history. Secondly, General Gowon's nine-year period was nine years full of very crucial issues in Nigeria's experience – from political crises to civil war and reintegration. Thirdly, the period 1966–75 covered a crucial period of Nigeria's state-building process. And finally, Gowon was involved, and was responsible for major decisions in this crucial period in Nigeria's history.

This book is not a regular political biography. It is an attempt at a scholarly analysis of the Nigerian polity. It attempts to see the Nigerian polity through the perceptual prism of the leader – his feelings in situations of stress in crisis decision-making, and non-crisis decision-making. It attempts also to see the leader and his capabilities through the intricate web of Nigeria's polity. What in Nigeria's political setting helps to build, or immobilize and subsequently destroy its leaders?

Very often as scholars and non-participants, it is not easy for us to ascertain the predicament in which a leader finds himself or herself with regard to a particular issue. I believe that my attempt in this book is to bring a bit of the leader's feelings into the analysis of the Nigerian polity. I also believe (perhaps erroneously) that a biography offers me the best opportunity to do this. It will, therefore, not be surprising to the readers that there are many quotations in the text and even in the footnotes. These are also aimed at achieving the same objective. Whether I have achieved the objective of writing a *scholarly* biography or not; whether I have been objective or not, is not mine to judge. What I do know is that I have tried to avoid (but not ignore) the usual analysis of African Polities by Western Scholars who see all our problems as traceable to *ethnicity* (used when they are polite), or to *tribalism* (used perjoratively). I have not ignored ethnicity as a crucial variable but have tried to show that there are many more variables.

In writing this book, I am indebted to so many people, I do not know where to start the list. I shall just mention a few, while I extend blanket gratitude to the many others. I am grateful to General and Mrs Victoria Gowon whose kindness and generosity to my wife and me in London made it easier for me to conduct this research. On the whole, I had a total of twenty-three hours of recorded interview, and many more hours of unrecorded ones. The General's patience and his wife's tolerance helped a great deal. Many times we started our interviews at 10:00 a.m. and did not finish until 8:00 p.m. My gratitude and thanks also go to other members of the Gowon family – my good friends Peter, Daniel, Kande, Dauda and Isaiah as well as Mrs Dimka and Mrs Nur. I cannot forget the warmth and cheerful assistance of Madam Saratu Gowon – the General's mother. I must mention specifically the assistance and encouragement of Mr Daniel Gowon, with whom I became very close over the years.

My thanks also go to Professor Ishaya Audu, Professor James O'Connell and Mr Martin Dent for their assistance and encouragement. My greatest source of encouragement was Mr Keith Ashfield, at that time the Editor with George Allen and Unwin, who has now left that company. Keith believed in my capabilities more than I did

myself and his assistance helped me over many knotty thresholds during my long period of research.

I express profound thanks to all those I interviewed in and outside the military establishment. Unfortunately, I shall not mention the names of serving military officers for obvious reasons. But I must mention a few retired men who really helped me in this research. These include, Col William Walbe (rtd.); Col Anthony Ochefu (rtd.); Major-General Ibrahim Haruna (rtd.), among many others.

My gratitude also goes to: Mr Johnny DanKande, Mr John Samci, Mr Solomon Asemota (who really pushed to see me finish this book), Professor Ali Mazrui (who has always been an inspiration), Mallam Nuhu Bayero, Canon Mohammed, Professor Omo Omoruyi, Professor E.U. Emovon, Justice Paul Anyebe, Professor Adamu Baikie, Professor O.C. Onazi, Mr O.A. Onazi, Mr Sati Gogwim, Dr Edwin Ogbu, Mr Michael Ani, Mr Abu Obe, Mr Philip Asiodu, Mr Allison Ayida, Mr Ebong, Mr Uriah Angulu, Dr and Mrs Inalegwu Iklaga and many others.

I must mention the painstaking care taken by my colleague, Mr Idoko Akor, in going through the drafts, proof-reading and offering incisive critique of the manuscript. Mrs Evelyn Iroegbu did a good job under pressure of all the drafts and my thanks also go to her, as well as Mr Peter Eze, the former secretary of my department.

The periods I spent on a Fulbright-Hays Foundation Fellowship to Kentucky, as well as periods at the Rockefeller Foundation residency at Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Italy, provided opportunities for me to write some earlier drafts of this book. I am indebted to both foundations for their assistance.

Finally, the support given to me by members of my family especially by Samuel Ajonye, Rose Ene, Ikpa and Godwin Elaigwu – my brothers and sister – are all most appreciated. The patience and assistance of my wife, Margaret, and the tolerance of my children – Omeyi and Isawa (who saw their father only very occasionally at the final stage of this work) are acknowledged with love and gratitude. My immense gratitude and thanks extend to all those, who have, in one way or the other, helped me in the process of writing this work.

In the final analysis, however, while acknowledging all the above assistance, I take full responsibility for all errors including those of fact and/or interpretation in this book.

J. Isawa Elaigwu



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

On January 15, 1970, a young military officer, beaming with smiles, was seen at Dodan Barracks<sup>1</sup> embracing erstwhile secessionist leaders who had come to the Head of State's residence to renounce secession. In a midnight broadcast, General Gowon had declared – 'The so-called rising sun of Biafra is set for ever . . . The tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have the opportunity to build a new nation . . . All Nigerians share the victory of today.'<sup>2</sup> The General emphasized that in the war which had just ended, there was to be no victor and no vanquished – it was a victory for all Nigerians.

Nigerians then took to the streets and demonstrated their support for the Federal Military Government. By General Gowon's thirty-sixth birthday (October 19, 1970) the Nigerian military leader had been described in the most positive of adjectives – 'A soft spoken but dynamic leader'; 'A real gentleman'; 'A level headed army boss'; 'An almost faultless administrator'; 'A soldier reluctantly in Government'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet barely four years later, the press had become hostile to this 'faultless administrator'. The period of praise had elapsed and soon the services of this leader were to recede into obscurity as new issues challenged the capability of the government he headed.

Allegations of corruption against his lieutenants in government, and his apparently nonchalant reactions to these allegations, only helped to worsen the situation. By the time General Gowon (who had been dubbed the 'Abraham Lincoln of Nigeria') made a graceful exit from the political scene as a result of the coup of 29 July, 1975, the epithets used in describing him had dramatically changed. He was accused of 'weakness' and of managing a purposeless administration which had led to the 'drifting' of the nation. General Gowon was removed from office as Head of State and was retired from the army, with full benefits in recognition of his 'past services to the nation'.<sup>4</sup>

Soon the same public, the same crowd, which had cheered Gowon in the dying moments of his rule (on the 27th of July 1975 as he left for Kampala, Uganda, for an OAU meeting) was to demand his return to face trial for alleged complicity in the assassination of his

successor, General Murtala Mohammed, on February 13, 1976. The services he had rendered to the nation (which Murtala himself had acknowledged) were now forgotten or driven under the carpet. Newspaper columnists referred to Gowon's nine years in office as nine years of misrule and failure.<sup>5</sup> All names of streets bearing his name were changed, and all plaques at any project, building or institution, which Gowon had officially opened, were repainted or defaced to make it impossible to read the inscriptions on them. All radio stations were specifically ordered not to play any record which carried songs of praise of the former leader. As Shakespeare observed, 'There are many events in the womb of time.'<sup>6</sup> No one can recount these events better than the actor - General Gowon - for whom such changes must have had direct consequences.

A softspoken young man, General Gowon had emerged from obscurity to limelight - from a very humble background to the highest office in the nation; he also attained the highest rank in the armed forces of which he had become the Commander-in-Chief. A creature of circumstances, General Gowon had narrowly escaped death in the January 1966 coup which he later played an important role in suppressing. Thereafter he emerged into limelight as Chief of Staff of the Army under the Ironsi administration which took over power from the civilian government in 1966. In the crucible of Nigeria's crisis, the July 1966 coup saw his assumption of office as the new Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. He was a compromise candidate in the context of Nigeria's crisis of leadership, after three days of political interregnum. As Commodore Wey once told the military leaders at Aburi, Ghana: 'I want to repeat, if we did not have the opportunity of having Jack (Gowon) to accept, God knows we would have been all finished . . . I do think people can appreciate the difficulties we were in . . .'<sup>7</sup>

Gowon's assumption of office did not stop bloodshed in the country. And soon a distressed Gowon was to make a pledge to the nation in his address to the Ad Hoc Committee on Constitutional proposals:

As I said, for God's sake, don't lose hope. If we are alive and if we are determined, we can get this country back to its proper shape. I am determined to do that even if it means my life. I give you my word for it.<sup>8</sup>

The end of the Civil War and the return of peace to the country in 1970 may be seen as Gowon's fulfilment of his pledge. But if Gowon was a creature of crisis, should he have withdrawn his services after that crisis? While Abraham Lincoln was transformed into a martyr by his assassination, the Nigerian Abe Lincoln did not have this painful

and unpleasant luxury. His performance in peacetime was to come under careful scrutiny by his subjects.

In this book, the author makes a modest attempt at a scholarly political biography of someone he believes has rendered great services to the Nigerian nation (even given his weaknesses) but which the corroding effects of the immediate past have obscured. It is this author's belief that history will be kinder to Gowon than the present Nigerian public has been to him. Perhaps then, when most of us who make various judgements (tinted by emotions and self-interest) have gone; Nigeria will have survived all of us. Then History's lances of justice will dissect, interpret and evaluate the events of the past score of years.

Nevertheless, the author's interest is not to absolve Gowon of his past political records or make a defence for him in the court of conscience of the audience, but to write an objective political biography of Gowon. We shall look at the positive aspects in his administration as well as his weaknesses as a leader. This author does not share the belief that Gowon's nine years in office were nine years of failure as some newspapers, which had flattered Gowon to his doom, have contended. If it is possible to identify a number of thresholds in Gowon's administration, it is also possible to identify the approximate point in time when the strains of his administration became visible to observers and the public generally.

It was Barrington Moore who once wrote: '... if men of the future are ever to break the chains of the present, they will have to understand the forces that forged them.'<sup>9</sup> This writer believes that one legacy Nigerians of today can leave for the men of the future is a documentation of events of the past and present written as honestly, as truthfully, as it is humanly possible. That is why in this book we shall be looking at the political life of General Gowon. Who was this man, this leader, called Yakubu Gowon? How did he perform as a political actor? Why and how was the reservoir of goodwill and credibility which he had accumulated by the end of the Civil War expended? Beyond this, this book looks at General Gowon's conception of Nigeria - Yakubu's Nigeria. What image of Nigeria did he have when he came into power or office? What sort of Nigeria did he set out to build? Did he ever achieve his objectives? Why and/or why not? We shall isolate a few crisis issues so that the former leader can explain the working of his mind (i.e., factors he took into consideration) when he took decisions on these issues and the constraints he experienced in the process of decision-making. In addition, we shall try to answer a number of questions:

- (1) Was Gowon's rise and fall a typical Shakespearean plot - with a hero whose admirable qualities might be his undoing? If his

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weakness was positively functional during the Nigerian crisis (it provided for reconciliation) was it conducive to peacetime Nigeria?

- (2) Was Gowon (like his predecessors - Abubakar and Ironsi) a victim of a socio-political environment he never really understood, nor was ever able to control sufficiently?
- (3) To what extent was Gowon's case typical of military-statesmen generally; the problem of changing the techniques of administration in the barracks to those conducive to the administration of a state?
- (4) Or was Gowon's case the result of low adaptive capability of a different kind? Should he, as a creature of crisis, have called it quits after the crisis which brought him to power had been taken care of? Did he outlast his welcome? Was it the Nigerian public, his military constituency or both which had grown tired of his leadership? Did his problems derive from his inability to adapt his successful technique of administration during a crisis period to peacetime conditions?
- (5) Or was Gowon's case another Tafawa Balewa case; in which his political lieutenants polluted the political atmosphere for all and made his job a near-impossible task?
- (6) Or was Gowon a victim of credulity; a very costly political item?
- (7) Was Gowon really linked to the Dimka blunder? Could a military man with such immense training as Gowon had; could a political leader who had made a graceful exit out of the country and had asked his countrymen to support his successors, easily turn around to organize such an ill-planned coup - a catastrophic exercise in elite instability?
- (8) Nigeria's Gowon, Yakubu's Nigeria - what lessons of leadership emerge from this case for leaders who operate in the context of institutional fluidity in developing countries?

## Notes

- 1 Dodan Barracks became the official residence of the Head of State and the Government House, after August 1966
- 2 Broadcast to the Nation by H.E. Major-General Yakubu Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, 15 January, 1970
- 3 *Daily Sketch* (Ibadan), *Yakubu Gowon: Soldier-Statesman: A Daily Sketch Souvenir*, October 19, 1970
- 4 Broadcast to the Nation by H.E. Brigadier Murtala Mohammed, July 30, 1975, in Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Drift and Chaos Arrested* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1975 p. 6)
- 5 *The Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin). February 1976

- 6 William Shakespeare's character Iago in *Othello*.
- 7 Federal Military Government, *Meeting of the Military Leaders* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1967 p. 13)
- 8 Federal Military Government, *The Struggle For One Nigeria* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1967 p. 41)
- 9 Barrington Moore. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966 p. 508)

## Chapter 2

# Leadership Style and the Political System

According to Ali Mazrui, at least five leadership styles among African leaders can be identified. There are: 1) intimidatory leader, 2) patriarchal leader, 3) leader of reconciliation, 4) the mobilizational leader and 5) the bureaucratic leader. *The intimidatory leader* 'relies primarily on fear and on instruments of coercion to assert his authority' and he specializes in the use and/or threat of use of force to extract compliance from his fellow countrymen. Mazrui observed that many military regimes in Africa have tended to 'drift towards both bureaucratic and intimidatory style.' *The patriarchal leader*, on the other hand, is basically 'one who commands neo-filial reverence, a near-father figure', like Mzee Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya. *The leader of reconciliation* relies,

for his effectiveness on qualities of tactical accommodation and a capacity to discover areas of compromise between otherwise antagonistic viewpoints. He remains in control as long as he is successful in politics of compromise and synthesis. The reconciliation is quite often between antagonistic political interest groups. But in the present day Africa the reconciliation leader may have to perfect also the art of reconciling the military with the civilian sectors of authority.<sup>1</sup>

Examples of the reconciliation leader are Milton Obote of Uganda before the Amin coup of 1971, and Nigeria's Abubakar Tafawa Balewa who was killed in the January 1966 coup.

The fourth type of leader is the *mobilization leader* whose main drive is ideology, with an undercurrent of charismatic qualities which buttress his ability to mobilize the populace for a particular kind of social action. And the fifth kind of leader – the *bureaucratic leader* – is the low-key type who relies on 'efficiency rather than evocation, procedure rather than passion.'<sup>2</sup> Along similar lines, Apter identifies four types of political system, namely; mobilizational, bureaucratic,

theocratic and reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> According to Apter, a reconciliation system emphasizes pluralism and desire to reconcile diverse interests – it 'mediates, integrates, and above all, coordinates rather than organizes.'<sup>4</sup>

In this book we suggest that the Nigerian political system is basically a reconciliation system, and that General Gowon lasted as long as he did in office, because he adopted a reconciliation style of leadership. His fall may be related to his inability to retain appreciable amount of success in 'the politics of compromise and synthesis.' In the last years of his administration, it seemed that Gowon's art of reconciling military and civilian sectors of the society was fast showing signs of strain.

That Nigeria is a reconciliation system is evident in its heterogeneous nature and the centrifugal social forces which had bedevilled the stability of the nation from independence, if not before it. We shall be turning to this point later. But for the moment, it is pertinent to quote Kirk-Greene's observation on the Nigerian political system to show the difficulties of leadership in such a setting. Commenting on the tragedy of Nigeria, Kirk-Greene wrote:

In the final analysis the Nigerian tragedy has been bedevilled by a set of oppositions – generalized, stereotyped, not necessarily of the same order and may be imaginary, yet each widening the wound and reducing the hopes of healing it; North vs South, Islam vs Christianity, alleged feudalism vs assumed socialism, federal vs unitary preferences, traditional authority vs achieved elitism, haves vs have-nots, each with sinister undertones of tension, irreconcilability and threatened withdrawal. None was quite entirely accurate. Nevertheless each opposing set had sufficient seeds of truth within it to permit, and even fertilize the growth of feared fact from the semi-fiction of its existence.<sup>5</sup>

In this context the federal compromise solution had experienced severe stress over time. Attempts by the first military leadership to cope with the problem through mobilization – with hierarchical authority structure and emphasis on organizational structure and minimum accountability<sup>6</sup> – had led to communal instability<sup>7</sup> within the Nigerian political setting. It does seem that Gowon's role as a moderator, coordinator and mediator in the political system did serve some useful purpose. The question is why Gowon lost his art of reconciliation towards the end of his nine-year rule. The answer to this question ties back to whatever answers we may be able to provide for the eight questions we asked earlier. Meanwhile we shall turn to the political setting under which Gowon was born and was later to emerge as a leader.

## The Political Stage: Nigeria in Historical Perspective

The 'present unity of Nigeria, as well as its disunity, is in reflection of the form and character of the common government British superstructure — and changes it has undergone since 1900. By 1900, what later came to be known as Nigeria was three colonies and territories under the umbrella of British colonialism, but administered separately, receiving orders direct from London. These were the colony of Lagos and what came to be known as the Protectorates of Southern Nigeria and Northern Nigeria.

In 1906, the colony of Lagos and the protectorate of Southern Nigeria were unified under a single administrator. In 1914, the colony of Lagos and the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated as the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Nigeria was divided into the Colony of Lagos, and Northern, Eastern, and Western groups of Provinces in 1939, with each group of Provinces having a Chief Commissioner who was responsible to the Governor in Lagos.

If the amalgamation of 1914 was aimed at creating a political fusion of the North and the South, it did not have the objective of building a unified state, for the purpose of indigenous government. In this British colonialism was not unique; many colonial regimes did not often give thought to granting independence to their subjects and as such, gave little thought to the form of government and administration which would best suit the people in a particular territory. Thus between 1914 and 1946, very little effort was made to integrate Northern and Southern Provinces. They were administered separately, and the colonial officials in these administrations continuously fought to keep each group of provinces separate. This led to the quip that 'if all Africans were to leave Nigeria, the Northern and Southern administrators would go to war.'<sup>10</sup> Except for the amalgamation of some essential departments, such as customs, education, railways, police and the prisons, little effort was made at integration.

Moreover, until the introduction of the Richards Constitution of 1946 which provided for a central Legislative Council, there was no central legislature in which the people of this territory could meet and deliberate together on issues affecting the country as a whole. The Northern Provinces had no representation in the central legislature until 1947. Thus, the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 did not result in an effective integration of the colonial territory called Nigeria. The colonial administrators were ambivalent about such integration.<sup>11</sup> This separate political development of the North and the South might have been suitable for colonial rule in that pe-

but it certainly was not suitable for the development of a state and a nation, especially given the context of Nigeria's multi-ethnicity.

Thus when Nigerians met for the first time in the legislative Council in 1947, they met as strangers. The nature of colonial rule had not encouraged horizontal interaction, even though it had maximized vertical interaction between the various groups and the colonial administration. This contributed to suspicions and fears as Nigerians saw themselves as operating in the same context with strangers they had not really got to know. This parochialism of Nigerians, this mistrust of one another, we may call *parochialism based on ignorance* of one another.

The Richards constitution had legally established three regions – the North, East and West. It also provided for a central legislature and regional legislatures.<sup>12</sup> But while the constitution took into account Nigeria's heterogeneity, it was basically unitary in nature even if it was decentralized administratively. With the Richards constitution, it had become evident to many Nigerian groups that the colonial umbrella would soon be folded. Intense nationalist activities pressed for greater devolution of power in Nigeria. This resulted in the Macpherson Constitution of 1951. Under this constitution, the new regions acquired more autonomy. They were empowered to send representatives to the central legislature. At the centre, twelve Nigerians were elected members of the Council of Ministers. From 1951 to 1954, however, greater pressure by Nigerians had led to more autonomy for the regions. This was legalized by the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution. Not only had regional Assemblies sprung up, regional bureaucracies had also been established. Even the Marketing Board had been regionalized. Why were there demands for regional autonomy and for the establishment of a federal form of government?

The very prospect of decolonization in Nigeria had led to tensions among groups who competed for power 1) to protect their group interests against possible invasion by other groups in the competitive process and, 2) to take over the reins of power from the colonial government and control the dispensation of allocatable resources and patronage. Nigerian nationalists began to withdraw into their ethnic and regional cocoons which gave them a sense of greater security as they competed with one another. This parochialism in the terminal colonial period we may call – the *Parochialism of Awareness* – based on awareness of others in the competitive setting. Emergent identities soon crystallized around the new regions. Even though there were many demands for the creation of more states in Nigeria by minority ethnic groups in the various regions, such intra-regional ethnic differences were often driven under the carpet to present a homogeneous front for inter-regional competition. Political parties which had emerged soon took on regional labels, consciously or

unconsciously. The very process of decolonization had not only given momentum to regionalism but had also encouraged aggressive ethnicity. Very often the two coincided to create ethnoregionalism.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, the extent of centrifugal tendencies in the system was illustrated by the threats during the constitutional conferences. The Northern Region had threatened to secede from Nigeria in 1950, if it was not granted an equal number of representatives in the Central Legislature to the Southern Regions. In 1953 the Western delegation threatened to opt out of Nigeria if Lagos capital territory and the Colony were not merged with the Western Region.<sup>14</sup> Threats of secession in Nigeria did not end with independence, as we shall find out later.

By 1956, the three major leaders had become grafted onto their regions, which had increasingly become centers of power. Nnamdi Azikiwe had returned to the Eastern Region as Premier, Awolowo was Premier of the Western Region, while Ahmadu Bello took on the title of the Chief Minister of Northern Nigeria. Secure in the regions, the leaders jealously guarded any erosion of regional powers - even Nnamdi Azikiwe, who had supported a strong centre equivocated.

By 1957, the role of colonial administrators became increasingly supervisory as Nigeria passed through the terminal colonial period. The central legislature became a parliament, when the Prime Minister (who came from the majority party, the NPC) formed his cabinet. Regional representatives to the central legislature were no longer elected indirectly through their regional legislatures, but directly.<sup>15</sup> In this same year, the Western and Eastern Regions attained self-government, while self-government in the North was delayed until 1959 - a reflection of the differential pattern of social mobilization among groups in Nigeria.

After the federal elections of 1959, the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa formed his 'independence' cabinet. His political executives became heads of the various departments and ministries. October 1, 1960 marked Nigeria's emergence as a sovereign nation within the Commonwealth. In 1963, Nigeria became a Republic with Nnamdi Azikiwe as the first President of the country. His main functions were to maximize the symbolic capability of the state, while Abubakar T. Balewa remained the functional head of government.

With these main structures, Nigeria entered a new era as an independent federal state. But two major though related issues had been driven under the carpet by the politicians in their anxiety to attain independence. The first was the fundamental imbalance in the federal structure and the second was the related issue of the fears of minority groups which had led to the establishment of the Willink Commission in 1957.<sup>16</sup> These issues were to bug the nation in her

early years of statehood. How did Nigeria practice her federalism after 1960?

It has been suggested by many Nigerians that it was not the constitution as much as the interpretation and the implementation of certain items in it by the regions, which guarded their autonomy jealously as they competed for the control of the central government, which confirmed the fragility of Nigeria's federalism. As the regions became more autonomous the central government was subjected to the strains of centrifugal forces which indicated that federalism was, for many Nigerian elites, a desire for union but not unity.

Essentially, a federal system is a 'process of bringing about a dynamic equilibrium between the centrifugal and centripetal forces in the society,'<sup>17</sup> and it entails continuous adjustments between the Federal Government and the government of the component units. These adjustments could either be in the direction of 'further differentiation and autonomy or of integration and unity.' In Nigeria, the federal adjustment between 1960-65 was in the direction of 'further differentiation and autonomy' of the component units. It was a federation based on psychological fears of political and economic domination<sup>18</sup> among Nigerian groups.

These suspicions and fears of domination arose from two basic issues in Nigeria's political setting - 1) the fundamental imbalance in Nigeria's federal structure, and 2) the differential spread of Western education i.e. the relative coincidence of skills acquired through formal Western education with regional boundaries, and opportunities in the modernizing sector of the society.

It was K.C. Wheare who argued that for the successful operation of a federal system it is; 'Undesirable that one or two units should be so powerful that they can overrule the others and bend the will of the federal government to themselves.'<sup>19</sup>

The lop-sided nature of the federal set-up generated the fear of political domination among the various groups in the country. The Northern Region accounted for 79% of the country's total area as compared to Eastern Region's 8.3% and the Western Region's 8.5%. The North also had a demographic leverage over the Southern Regions - by the 1963 census figures, it accounted for 53.5%, the Eastern Region 22.3%, the Western Region 18.4%, the Midwestern Region 4.6%, and Lagos Federal Territory 1.2% of the total population of 55.6 million.

It was, therefore, not surprising that in the Southern Regions there was always the fear of Northern domination by virtue of that Region's large population. To them, the federal structure as it existed made it virtually impossible for the South to control political power at the centre, given the ethnoregional politics in the country.

On the other hand, the Southern Regions had a headstart over the

North in the acquisition of Western education which had become a passport to job opportunities in the modern sector of the society, such as the bureaucracy, parastatals and the economic sphere. The possibility of the tyranny of skills from the South was verdant in the memories of Northern leaders. As the late Premier of the former Northern Region saw the situation:

We were very conscious indeed that the Northern Region was far behind the others educationally. We know that individually the educated Northerners could hold their own against the educated Southerners, but we simply had not got the numbers they had, nor had we people with university degrees necessary as a qualification . . . for some of the higher posts.<sup>20</sup>

Thus while the North feared Southern domination through skills, the South feared Northern domination by population. In fact, there was relative division of functions between the North and the South which maintained some delicate balance in the political system. The Northern control of political power was counter-balanced by the Southern monopoly of economic power. But these unofficial divisions of functions only created greater insecurity among the regions as they interacted with one another.

It was not necessarily important that there was actual domination. But it was important that Nigerian groups felt there was the danger of domination, for this influenced their actions and reactions towards one another. Given this fear the political system witnessed the manifestation of centrifugal tendencies as each region demanded greater autonomy to protect its interests. The crises over the census exercises of 1962 and 1963; the federal election of 1964; the location of the iron and steel complex; the revenue allocation formula; the Western Region's election in 1965; and attempts by the regions to interfere in foreign policy (an exclusively federal matter) are all illustrations of the politics of insecurity and ethnoregional hostilities within the Nigerian federal structure before 1966. These crises illustrate the inability of the Federal Government to control the regions - a situation worsened by the relatively loose nature of Nigeria's federalism.

As the military leaders who took over the reins of government from the civilians observed:

Under the old Constitution, the regions were so large and powerful as to consider themselves self-sufficient and almost entirely independent. The Federal Government which ought to give lead to the whole country was relegated to the background. The people were not made to realize that the Federal Government was the real government of Nigeria.<sup>21</sup>

In fact the regions had become so powerful that there were talks among Nigerians about the 'regional tail' wagging the 'federal dog'. As mentioned above, the regions had threatened secession before independence. This continued after independence, for the Eastern Region was reported by the State House Diary<sup>22</sup> to have threatened to secede after the federal elections of 1964 – something the other regions had done before independence.

It is now generally accepted by objective observers that by the end of 1965 the Nigerian political scene had become dangerous for everyone. We shall summarize some of the salient features of the political system by 1965 as; 1) the blatant violation of the 'rule of the game' of politics, thus making politics dangerous for political actors and spectators alike; 2) the gross misuse of political power and lack of new opportunities for political failures; 3) misappropriation of public funds and widespread corruption; 4) the erosion of the rights of the individual; 5) imprudent political and economic decisions in allocation of scarce but allocatable resources; 6) disenfranchisement of the populace through the blatant rigging of elections; and 7) conspicuous consumption of political leaders amidst the abject poverty of the masses. In some regions, law and order had been severely threatened, especially in the Western Region where there were incidents of arson, thuggery and political homicide.

Thus, by the end of 1965, the gross political instability which followed the negation of the rules of the 'game of politics' had doomed to virtual extinction the politics of participation, tolerance and compromise. Of course when the political environment had become polluted and there were no acceptable forms of political ventilation, Nigeria's 'game of politics' became transformed into a 'battle of politics' – thus making it dangerous for both players and spectators in a political stadium in which one's loyalty and support were demanded in one form or the other.

When the military sent the civilian politicians packing on January 15, 1966, it was no wonder that very few tears were shed for them. Most people were surprised, but at least there was a temporary sigh of relief as the military took over political leadership. This was the stage onto which Yakubu Gowon had been born and had lived and on which he was soon to be called to play important roles. He was a member of the new group of political managers, the new 'politicians in khaki' who had inherited an unenviable political legacy from their predecessors. But who was this man Yakubu Gowon? What was his background?

## Notes

- 1 Ali Mazrui, *Soldiers and Kinsmen in Uganda: The Making of a Military Ethnocracy* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977, p. 7)
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 8
- 3 David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp. 359-421)
- 4 *Ibid.* According to Apter, a reconciliation system emphasizes pluralism and diverse interests - 'mediates, integrates and above all, coordinates rather than organizes and mobilizes'.
- 5 A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*, Vol. 1. (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 5)
- 6 The Decree no 34, 1966 which introduced a unitary form of government in Nigeria was essentially a centralizing move. It was a process of state building by mobilization. It created problems for the Ironsi Administration - problems which Gowon inherited.
- 7 The reaction to the Unification Decree was *communal instability* in the Northern Region, i.e. the massacre of Ibos and other ethnics from the Eastern Region, who were resident in the Northern Region. See discussion of *communal instability* by D. Morrison and H. Stevenson, 'Integration and Instability: Patterns of African Political Development', *American Political Science Review*, LXVI, No. 3, September, 1972
- 8 James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958, pp. 45-46)
- 9 Sir Ahmadu Bello, *My Life* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962). Ahmadu Bello observed that: 'Lord Lugard and his amalgamation was far from popular among us at that time. There were agitations in favour of secession; we should set up on our own; we should cease to have anything more to do with the Southern people; we should take our own way.' (p. 135)
- 10 J.S. Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 47
- 11 Lord Hailey. Report on Nigeria: 1940-41, with a minute by H.E. the Governor, January 1942 (London, 1942, pp. 19-20), quoted in T.N. Tamuno, 'Separatist Agitations in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 8,4 (1970) p. 566 Tamuno claims that while the Commissioner of the Northern Provinces and 'his officials and Emirs encouraged separate development of the Northern Provinces vis-a-vis the Eastern and Western Provinces, officials in Lagos and the colonial office sought to discourage such tendencies'. (p. 566) Eme Awa, *Federal Government in Nigeria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), claims that it seemed unlikely that 'existing Chief Commissioners would welcome a change that strip them of substantial political and administrative power.' (p. 17)
- 12 Sir Arthur Richards, *Proposals for the Revision of the Constitution of Nigeria*. Cmd, 6599 (1945)
- 13 Ethnoregionalism is used to refer to the crystallization of the identity of the major ethnic groups with the regional administrative boundaries. In Nigeria, there were three major ethnoregional groups; The Hausa-Fulani in the North, Ibos in the East and the Yoruba in the Western Region. In such situations the desire to protect regional interests implicitly involves the desire to protect the interests of the major ethnic group in that region - in competition with those from other regions. The region as an administrative unit becomes the base for competition with other ethnic groups.
- 14 T.N. Tamuno 'Separatist Agitations in Nigeria', *Loc. cit.*, pp. 187-188
- 15 Interview with Aminu Kano.
- 16 The Willink Commission of Enquiry into the fears of minorities was established in

1957. It submitted its report in 1959. See Nigeria, *Report of the Commission appointed to Enquire into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them* (London, HMSO, Cmd. 505, 1958)
- 17 Adebayo Adedeji, 'Federalism and Development-Planning In Nigeria' in A.A. Ayida and H.M.A. Onitiri (eds) *Reconstruction and Development in Nigeria: Proceedings In Theory and Practice* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 103)
- 18 A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear*, Research Report, No. 27 (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1975) is a very interesting analysis of this aspect of Nigerian politics.
- 19 K.C. Wheare, *Federal Government* (4th edition) New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 50
- 20 Sir Ahmadu Bello, *My Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 110
- 21 Broadcast to the Nation by H.E. Maj-General Gowon, 26 May 1968; also in Federal Republic of Nigeria. *Faith In Unity*. (Lagos: Government Printer, 1970, p. 108)
- 22 J.P. Mackintosh, *Nigerian Government and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1966, p. 557-626); Also B.J. Dudley, *Instability and Political Order: Politics and Crises in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973, p. 63)

## Chapter 3

# Wusasa: From Tuwan to Toil

In the small village of Tuwan near Kabwir in Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State of Nigeria, a soft spoken farmer about 40 years of age had just experienced a major crisis in his life. He had just made a transition from a way of life under traditional religion to a new one governed by what was generally regarded as the 'white man's religion' - i.e. Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Yohanna Gowon's conversion to Christianity was only the beginning of his crisis-ridden life. He soon started to work with the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) in Tuwan. This work entailed the acquisition of the ability to read the Bible and spread the 'Word' to others - late in his life as that was. But beyond this problem was the change in the Christian mission in Tuwan area. The Sudan United Mission (S.U.M.) had taken over from the C.M.S. in that area, and Yohanna Gowon found himself working with new men and a new church. Unfortunately, he did not get along with these new missionaries as well as he had with C.M.S. officials. He had actually prayed on a number of occasions to get out of the mission, if it were possible.

Luckily, he received a message from Bishop Smith, in his period of indecision about his relationship with the new church, to move to Wusasa. Since he had yearned to leave the mission anyway, he accepted the offer. Moreover, he had been assured by Bishop Smith that Wusasa had the additional attraction of providing opportunities for him to get his children educated. The move, by itself, was a crisis - he had to leave his farm and kinsmen in Tuwan (a place to which he never returned before his death as a nonagenarian in 1973). In addition, he had to learn to speak Hausa more fluently in the new area he had decided to settle.

By the time Yohanna arrived in Wusasa in 1936, his fifth child, Yakubu was only two years old and his brother Daniel was the baby of the house. Yohanna had left his home, his kinsmen, his goats, sheep and farm to move to Zaria as an evangelist. He had certainly fared better economically at Tuwan than he did in Zaria. In Zaria, Pa Yohanna Gowon was a lay reader (and not a pastor as many writers claim). In this capacity, however, he preached extensively in outlying

muslim districts such as Dutsin Wai. After two years of evangelization, he had some misunderstanding with the C.M.S. missionaries in Zaria. In addition, his proficiency in Hausa was quite low, so he had to make way for another lay reader who was more fluent in the language of evangelization. As one of his children remarked: 'I can assure you, as a good Christian, he accepted this with a great heart and without complaint; and got down to his farm . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Thus Yohanna Gowon who had left his home town for Wusasa to evangelize saw himself become a full-time farmer, again another crisis of transition. However, he remained an active member of the church, while farming to sustain his family.

This was the most painful period in the history of the family. To get three square meals a day became a problem. It was on Yohanna's little farm that the family depended for survival. Yakubu Gowon in his reminiscences gave an insight into this period of his life:

Certainly we are not a well-off family at all. We were not materially well-off and one remembers the days that we had nearly gone without food and when things looked hopeless. The Old Man, my father, had great faith – because, honestly, we would kneel down and pray for we would not know when our next meal would be coming . . . One remembers days when we had nothing to eat and nothing to wear . . . But somehow, always, something seemed to happen like a miracle – either somebody opened the door to repay his debt or so, or we received some kind gesture from friends who brought help when we least expected it. And I suppose this sort of thing has happened to me even today . . .<sup>3</sup>

It was a period of hardship for the family. But having decided to pay full attention to his farm, he virtually mobilized every member of the family for farm work. The little boys (including Yakubu) would get up early and go to farm, before getting ready for school. Hill slopes and areas which people neglected as infertile were turned into arable lands by Yohanna Gowon who used his knowledge of terrace farming on the Plateau to cope with the adversity. In no time, Yohanna Gowon had become famous for his farming – up to the point that he was being generally referred to as 'Sarkin Noma' or 'King of Farmers' in Wusasa village. This alias, 'Sarkin Noma', became even more popular than his real name. It was, therefore, not unusual for people to ask for the house of 'Sarkin Noma' rather than Yohanna Gowon's house.

Throughout his period of adversity, he was buttressed by his faith in God, and the very good friends he had made in Wusasa. Among such good friends was Bishop Smith who was really kind to the family. Mallam Nuhu Bayero<sup>4</sup> (Dan Iyan Zanzau) who was the Chief

of Wusasa, and Mallam P.O. Ishyaku (Mallam Bisirka) were local people who were very helpful in getting the family to tide over the hardships. The three men, Yohanna Gowon, Nuhu Bayero and P.O. Ishyaku soon became 'very close friends and shared a lot of faith and trust among one another'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the story of the migration of the family from Tuwan to Wusasa was one of transition from relative self-sufficiency to toil; and from evangelization to farming. For Pa Gowon, however, it was a point of no return. While other members of the family could return for occasional visits to Tuwan, his home town and the memories of the past were behind him. Wusasa was the new home, the new place to settle and raise the children.

## The Bible, The Hoe and The Pen

Pa Yohanna Gowon<sup>6</sup> was a quiet and intensely religious man. A hard worker, he encouraged his children to read the Bible, woke them up from sleep in the early morning hours to pick up the hoe and accompany him to his farm from where the male children would return after an hour or two to prepare for school, where instead of the hoe, the pen became the instrument of performance.

Even female members of the family were not excluded from this routine. They helped their mother to remove husks from guinea corn, cook and carry out other household duties. If there was any trinity in the Gowon family, it was a combination of religious studies, hardwork on the farm, which tided them over hardships, and an emphasis on education – the Bible, the hoe and the pen.

There was nothing unique about this family. Although very often, biographers try to show how the actor they write about had a unique childhood, Yakubu Gowon's childhood was very normal, very natural. Like prankish little children anywhere, they fought among one another; they pinched meat from their mother's pot of soup, or stole groundnuts from their mother's store. Like most children, they were naughty. One gets a feeling of warmth and friendship meeting members of the family, even for the first time. Perhaps, this is related to the natural way the children were nurtured. As Yakubu Gowon described his early family life;

We were true to fashion – we were natural children; we fought among ourselves, and of course, the persons I never fought were my eldest brothers – Ibrahim and Peter because I knew they would give me a good beating . . . Maryamu . . . Yes, I gave her a lot of hell; with Rachael I tried to be rude – tried to show 'rough' to her – and she gave me a hell of a beating. Four years is no joke! And we

became the best of friends; after that I treated her with respect, you know . . .<sup>7</sup>

But their childhood was, all the same, one of discipline. Their mother, Saraya Kurinyan Gowon, a cheerful, kind but firm disciplinarian did not hesitate to wield the bulala or whip when the occasion called for it. Yakubu Gowon remembers very vividly his mother's ability to discipline her children:

One is grateful to God for the parents one had. My mother – a disciplinarian – she used to give us a good beating whenever we did something wrong, either when we pinched meat from her soup pot, or for doing something wrong . . . At the same time she tried to make sure that we learnt moral lessons from it – that we did not turn out to be bad boys or bad children. And she did not spare the rod, I can assure you that. She gave us a hell of a beating. But we are grateful for it. I remember there was a time – this was around 1944, she gave me such a beating that I said, 'Mama, when I grow up and I start earning money, I won't buy you any wrapper' . . .<sup>8</sup>

This impression has also been confirmed by other members of the family. She was the strict disciplinarian of the family. A cheerful extrovert, she seems to be a very hard-working woman. And even today, one can see her about six o'clock in the evening tending her goats back from the farm to their huts . . .<sup>9</sup>

Yohanna was also a disciplinarian, but of a different kind. He was more of a moralist than a wielder of the bulala. But he was also as effective as his wife was in instilling some lessons into his children through punitive measures. His children dreaded being called in for a moral lecture which deflated their ego.

But the Old Man – that was my father – he was a disciplinarian of a kind, more of a moralist. Sometimes honestly, I would say, I would rather be beaten than be told off – than for him to use his tongue. By the time he moralizes on an issue or something you had done wrong, you will certainly feel so small, so ashamed of yourself. It hurts more than the beating – that was the Old Man. I think a combination of Old Pa and the good old disciplinarian Mama . . . made each and everyone of us what we are.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these punitive aspects, there were more didactic aspects of family life through systematic teaching of religious and moral principles. It is very interesting that in spite of the initial hardship the family experienced in Wusasa, the parents taught the children not to 'envy those who got plenty' and exhorted the dignity of labour –

labour to provide for one's needs. This was behind his emphasis on good education for his children so that they could, through personal efforts, achieve success in life.

After interacting with members of the family one gets away with the impression that its members believe strongly in the Christian faith. The parents had taught the children the ten commandments and all such things any good Christian family teaches its young folks. The parents also insisted that the children practice their religious principles. 'As a result of that you will find that practically among us, hardly anybody ever drank; if anybody drank (alcohol) it must be later on in life - probably when he had broken off from the influence of the old man and old lady'.<sup>11</sup> They taught their children to be 'honest, truthful and sincere' and loyal to one another, but as Yakubu pointed out, this loyalty was not to be mistaken for blind fraternal loyalty. In fact, Yakubu's severe reproach of Danjuma's behaviour while the latter was working at Wusasa hospital, indicates that a member of the family who grossly misbehaves will not get the support of the family. In addition, the Gowons seem to have been very conscious of their family good name long before Yakubu became the Head of State. Who were the members of this family?

Yohanna and Sarayan Kurinyan Gowon were blessed with eleven children, out of which nine have survived. The eldest son was Ibrahim who had served in the World War II. He died in 1944 while still on active service. Peter was also in the Nigerian army and had fought in Burma during the Second World War. On his return, he joined the Department of Post and Telegraphs where he worked until he retired into the life of a businessman in the late sixties. Peter is married and has eight children.

Rachael was married to the late Mr Nur and has five children. Mary is Mrs Dimka and has two children, while Yakubu Gowon got married to Victoria Zakari in 1969. They now have three children - Ibrahim and Saratu and a little baby girl born early 1979. Daniel (the ever cheerful one) was Personnel Assistant with the Nigerian Tobacco Company in Zaria. He is now a successful businessman, married to Frieda, with three children. Following Daniel is Mrs Martha Kande Audu after whom her mother attained her nickname 'mamma Kande' (Kande's mother). She is married to James Audu and has five children. After Kande was Ishiyaku, a little boy who was raised great hopes for the future but who died after a short illness, at the age of two.

Moses was a captain in the Nigerian Air Force, but is now working with the Nigerian Airways as a pilot. He is married, with a child. Dauda is the intellectual of the family. A brilliant and very outspoken young man, he has taken degrees in Irrigation Engineering, and Journalism, and has just taken a doctoral degree from Utah State

University, Logan, Utah, USA. He got married to a Zambian girl in August 1978 and has a baby boy. Isaiah, the last born of the family was a captain in the Nigerian Army, who was released from a fifteen-year prison term, (as result of the February 13th, 1976 abortive Dimka coup) by President Shehu Shagari in October 1981.<sup>12</sup>

In general, the Gowon family is a close-knit family. Like all families it has its little problems, but on the whole it is a happy, religious and humble family. The most charming aspect of the family, noticed by the author, is their warmth – to both strangers and friends.<sup>13</sup> One gets the impression of a group of people who are very much at peace with themselves, happy, natural and straightforward. One hardly notices any tinge of disdain or affectation among them. Generally, they are very humble and very proud of their humble background. This is the family of a young boy who was later to lead Nigeria, a young boy who underwent the rigors of poverty and was later to experience the vicissitudes of life in a greater dimension. While he helped his father on the farm, he was also a very keen schoolboy. Let us take a brief look at his educational life in Wusasa.

## The Boy With a Satchel

We enjoyed ourselves as young children of the village. That is why Wusasa had a lot of effect on me. If I did any trip (especially in that part of the country) unless I finished up in Wusasa – to breathe the air – I had not really come around . . .<sup>14</sup>

Coming into Zaria from Kaduna, Wusasa village can be seen on the left-hand side, on a beautiful landscape, between Kufena hills and Tukur Tukur. A famous Christian island in a sea of Islamic Hausaland, Wusasa's history dates back to colonial times. Wusasa of today is the product of movements in the 1920's by Hausa Christians to establish a church of their own in Zaria city. Up till 1929 Christian converts had used a compound in Durmin Mai Garke in Zaria city, as their place for prayer. But as their population grew, the necessity for a big church became more evident.

However, an attempt to establish a church within the city met with much opposition from the Muslim rulers, who protested to the colonial authority. Lugard's policy had been one of non-intervention in the sociocultural life of the Emirates, so long as they were law abiding. As he stated in his *Dual Mandate*:

For reasons which concern the administrator's own responsibility, it was found necessary, both by Lord Kitchener in the Sudan and by myself in Nigeria to prohibit for the time being the establishment of Christian missions in Muslem districts . . .<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, it took much correspondence and negotiation between the administration, the missionaries, the Hausa Christian Community and the Emir's Court to settle the issue. The Muslim rulers had offered to give one square mile of any piece of land to the Christians if they agreed to move out of the city. Finally the site of the present village, Wusasa, was chosen by the Christians, just outside the walls of the city.

The first building in this new area was St Bartholomew's Church which was started in May 1929 and completed in the early months of 1930. The Reverend H.J.D. Miller became the first pastor of this church with a congregation of about 200 people. Other buildings were soon erected - staff quarters for the pastor, a primary school, middle school and private homes. From hardly inhabited land, Wusasa steadily grew into a famous centre for Christian activity and education. At the moment it has an estimated population of over 2,000 people. Equipped with an ultra-modern children's ward, Wusasa hospital has built a reputation for itself over the years. Kufena College (formerly St Paul's College) has also made a mark in the field of education since the early 1960s. Many members of the bureaucratic elite from the former Northern Nigeria went through St Paul's College which has very good records of performance in School Certificate examinations.

There are two primary schools in Wusasa - a junior and senior school. Perhaps the most outstanding aspect of Wusasa is the number of famous men it has produced over the years. Among such famous families are the Gowons, the Audus, the Millers, the Kitcheners, the Yarosons, and the Ibrahims. Of course, such personalities as Yakubu Gowon, Ishaya Audu, Nuhu Bayero and late Pa Ishyaku, have added to the lustre of Wusasa.

It was in this context that our major actor, Yakubu Gowon grew up. And as he said in the quotation above, the Wusasa 'air' had a special appeal for him, even while he was the Head of State of Nigeria. But how did Yakubu Gowon enjoy this Wusasa air?

Born on 19th October, 1934,<sup>16</sup> Yakubu Cinwa Gowon lived with his parents till he was about fifteen years old. His father could not afford to send him to the Wusasa boarding school, so like his younger brothers he had to be content with being a day pupil. He went to school every morning and returned in the early afternoon, though the ladies of the family were sent to boarding schools. This meant that Yakubu had an opportunity to interact with his parents quite closely and grew up to love them very much, as much as they loved him.

It is accepted in the Gowon household that of all its members, Yakubu was the most dedicated to school. He loved school and enjoyed his days in the school. Some of his teachers have readily

confirmed this. In fact, Yakubu would report his younger brothers and sisters who failed to go to school and, very often, these children got their share of bulala as a dissuasive pill. It was not surprising then, that he had much friction with Daniel his immediate younger brother whom he often reported for missing classes.

In 1939, Yakubu entered school in Infant Class I. In 1940, when he was in Infant Class II, he had learned to read Hausa so fluently that his teacher, Mallam Joseph Thompson, got him to read for higher classes – Standards I and II. While he developed a good reading capability in Hausa, his conversation in that language lagged behind his reading. Little Yakubu was constantly being teased for his accent. Of course, he had just come to that part of the country and Hausa was not his first language. He was still learning the language – a language that was to take precedence over his native tongue – for his Angas language gradually receded into the background. By the time he became Nigeria's leader he could understand, if spoken to in Angas, but could hardly speak a few correct sentences in his own language.

However, he did very well in his classes and had done so well in his Infant Class II that his class teacher, Mallam Joseph Thompson, thought he should be promoted to the next class, since his classmates who performed less brilliantly were being promoted. These promotions had been based more on size than merit, and Yakubu was a small boy in size. But he remained in his appropriate class – Standard I. Finally he was asked by Mallam Thompson to move to the next class anyway. (The following incident is interesting because of Yakubu's perception of it in the context of his life's story.)

But the Principal of the school, Miss Locke, a hardworking but awful woman who was feared by most of her colleagues in the Department of Education of Northern Nigeria decided to check on the register of attendance of pupils. Coming to Gowon's name, she called the name, Yakubu answered, 'present'. Yakubu recollects the incident:

So she said to me – 'wa ya ce ka zo wannan aji? Mai ya sa ka zo wannan aji?' Why did you come to this class? 'ka kwoma aji naka sosei'. Go back to your proper class. Of course I did not want to go [back]. Mallam Joseph Thompson had forced me to go [to the higher class] and the other teachers had also accepted; yes because I had done very well and usually it was accepted that those who had done so well could be promoted at Easter or even at half year. So I was driven [back] in disgrace. So don't you worry, it is not the first time that I have been disgraced. I was driven away from Standard II and back to Standard I. And of course, I didn't say who told me to do that . . .<sup>17</sup>

At the end of that year, Yakubu did very well and proceeded to the next class. He never had any double promotion, even when he performed very brilliantly. On the whole, Standard II was his year of academic stardom. He performed so brilliantly that he won practically every prize - History, Arithmetic, Painting, Cloth Weaving, etc. - except the prize for Bible Knowledge.

Yet it was the prize for Bible Knowledge that little Gowon most wanted, because 'I knew that father could not afford to buy me a Bible and I wanted a Bible. If I got that prize then, of course, I would have the Bible as a present'. Of course, he lost the prize, and started learning early in life that one's desires were not always met. Hauwa Yusufu (Later Mrs Dikko) won the prize by half a point. And though Hauwa was a close friend of his, he 'hated' her on that occasion for 'robbing' him of what he considered was his prize.

Yakubu Gowon's primary school days were very active. He played games and was generally genial or kind towards his peers and the younger ones. A number of incidents show how much of a natural schoolboy he was in Wusasa. Yakubu had joined the school band and knew how to play all the instruments, but on this special occasion he was playing the flute. He must have played a discordant note, for soon he felt a big smash on his head which nearly sent him sprawling. It was Mallam Thompson who had punished him for jarring the tune of the band. He rebelled and called it quits, but since he was regarded as a useful member of the team, he was persuaded to come back into the group. In compensation, Mallam Thompson became overly nice to him and even gave Yakubu the privilege to serve him as a houseboy - which was in those days a great honour. He often helped Mallam Thompson with his house chores during break period, between classes.

It was this new environment which gives us an insight into another experience of Yakubu Gowon as a schoolboy. At forty-five Yakubu had a father of three, listened to his little girl, Saratu, speaking English and he was so surprised, that he said to himself, 'at six years old, this little girl knows more English than I did in Middle IV.' Of course, he was not alone. Nigerians of his generation hardly had the opportunities available to children today, to learn the English language informally. However, during one of the break periods, Yakubu had gone to Mallam Thompson's house to help him with his domestic chores when he was sent to buy some kola nuts (goro) to put in a saucer, and serve them to Mallam Thompson's visitors. Yakubu bought the 'goro' alright, but was wondering what this thing called 'saucer' was. He was convinced, finally, that it was 'soso' (sponge) in Hausa language. But how could Mallam Thompson have asked him to put kola nuts on sponge or 'soso' and serve it to the guests? But remembering the knock he had received on his head while playing the flute

he was hesitant about asking Mallam Thompson. After a long wait Mallam Thompson entered the kitchen to find out what was happening about his order. It was then he saw Yakubu coming out of the kitchen with kola nuts placed carefully on sponge. Mallam Thompson then exploded into a fit of laughter, 'I didn't say you should put it on a "soso", I said "saucer",' he said. And that was the day Yakubu knew a saucer. Of course, Hausa was the medium of instruction in the early years of primary school and English language was taught just like any other subject. It was, therefore, not surprising that he did not know what a saucer was until this incident which happened to him in Standard IV, that is in 1944.

A jovial and gentle boy, Yakubu was not troublesome. But on a number of occasions he fought and fought well. Many of his mates remember occasions when he rushed to the aid of weak boys and girls who were being treated unjustly. His expedition to Johnny Dan Kande's family farm to pick up some guava fruits had led to a fight with the latter, who became a good friend of his. So also was his fight with one Muslim boy who always passed by his father's house. This Muslim boy had called him 'Dan Arna' (son of pagan) which had really touched the usually soft tempered Yakubu on the raw. He rejected entreaties by his mother and sister, fought with this boy and gave him a good beating. They became good friends thereafter.

Generally, his primary school days were happy. A brilliant little boy, he was also good in sports and was quite religious. At this very early stage in life, he had already taken on a role as the mace boy in the Church, and had held the mace on special occasions such as when Bishop Jones (the Anglican Bishop of Northern Nigeria) conducted services at St Bartholomew's Church.

After the junior school, Yakubu Gowon went to the middle school in Wusasa - a happy and fruitful five year period for him. In the middle school he was joined by a number of other boys, notably Adamu Baikie (now the Vice Chancellor, University of Benin) and Mr Michael Angulu (the Registrar of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board), and Paul Barnabas. Michael Angulu outshone all of them, coming top of the class most, if not all the time. But among Yakubu, Adamu and Paul, rotated the positions of second and third in the class. It was stiffly competitive, but in an atmosphere of friendliness.

However, while these four boys tolerated the idea of beating one another in the class, they detested being beaten by the girls. They slighted Margaret Kitchener (Mrs Olowu) for being slightly ahead of them in class - 'this little girl? They say she is cleverer than I, and she is in the next class? And we used to give her hell.'

If, however, a girl happened to beat them in class work, she was in for some chauvinistic treatment.

And of course, any girl who beat any of us would really have trouble from us. For example, Hauwa whom I said beat me in Scripture . . . the day she beat me in any subject, she had to make sure that she disappeared home before I knew, otherwise we would go and wait on the way and give her a good beating. So the girls were usually afraid of trying to beat us. This was what we were - chauvinist pigs - I think. Male Chauvinist Pigs we were in that period . . .<sup>18</sup>

On the whole, Yakubu, like others in the group enjoyed their years in the middle school. They benefited a great deal. They performed brilliantly in their classwork - performances which might have even been better if they had not lost some of their good teachers. At the end of the course, Yakubu sat for the junior Cambridge examinations. He failed the examination but had the best detailed results by subject. These were the days in Nigerian education when failure in English meant failure in the whole exam, no matter how well you did in other subjects. English was not Yakubu's favourite subject, even though he had expected to pass the English examinations.

Socially, the middle school had its nostalgic aspects. It was a period in which young Gowon mixed freely with Christian and non-Christian alike. He had been invited to the boarding school by the school authorities and had been made a Senior House Prefect for Crowder House - next only to the Head Boy Lawal Kwatar Kwashi and his cousin, Paul Barnabas. Thus, in his first year in the boarding school, he was made number three in the student hierarchy of authority. This appointment, Yakubu, regards as the 'first major challenge of responsibility', even though he had served as monitor or class leader from the age of seven through twelve, in the junior school. He was a very active member of his house in sports and other activities as the reports by his headmaster show.

Just as his junior school days, Yakubu enjoyed being prankish in middle school. In the Middle I, for example, he was among the group who never did well in English language tests, and so had to forfeit their Saturday outing (which was mostly spent picking fruits at Kufena or Dallah hills). The Reverend Broadbent (nicknamed 'boroshi' by his students) made sure that those who performed poorly in English received good 'brushes' on their buttocks while lying face down on his lap. Yakubu and his fellow students detested this and made sure that when poised delicately on Reverend Broadbent's lap, they would urinate or 'pee' on him or pollute the air ('*tusa*' in Hausa). The old man would then push them away with a shout - 'go away, go away'. It was a prankish mechanism for avoiding punishment.

But it is interesting that, in 1978 during the convocation ceremony at Warwick University, Yakubu Gowon walked briskly to the Re-

verend Broadbent, and said to him – 'thank you very much for what you've done for us'. In reminiscence, Yakubu has interesting comments on the early missionaries in Wusasa, including Reverend Broadbent and Lynn Roberts:

Honestly they really went out to give us a good all round education. At least, I would say this for our mission in Wusasa – they tried to make us into human beings; to make men of us. Honestly they did not try to make us inferior black people, etc. They tried to get the best of character, upbringing and ideals in us. That I would say for the C.M.S. Mission at Wusasa. Yes, I am grateful to each and everyone of them; and I am sure all of us are grateful to them . . .<sup>19</sup>

This is a very positive commentary on the role of missionary churches, especially given the numerous criticisms of the role of Christian churches in the past decade. Most inhabitants of Wusasa do share Gowon's impression of the C.M.S. churches.

In 1949 his last year in middle school, young Gowon took an entrance examination to Government College, Zaria (now Barewa College). To his surprise, he passed while Michael Angulu whom he thought would have no difficulty in passing the examination, did not make it. With his admission into Barewa College, Gowon was to leave Wusasa, for the first time in his life, to acquire education elsewhere. But Government College, Zaria, was only a stone's throw away from Wusasa.

There was no doubt that Yakubu Gowon's early years in Wusasa were crucial formative years in his life. He had performed brilliantly, and had been given opportunities for leadership right through his school life. Moreover, he had come to make new friends and had become part of the Wusasa environment. A stranger from among the Angas, Gowon came to Wusasa and began learning Hausa. Not only did he become proficient in the language, he had virtually lost his own language. His friends were not Angas, but Hausa-Fulani and others in the area and in the school he attended.

In a lot of ways, he was a real Nigerian; to him Wusasa was his home, he knew no other. As he described his Wusasa experience:

Honestly, all of us in that village really grew to love one another . . . That place created a true love atmosphere. I hope you will forgive me when I say 'Christian love' . . . The other interesting thing was that even Muslim boys were part of us. We respected their religion and we did not interfere with it. And we played with one another as friends. That was how close we were. As a result of this, certainly one grew up without being too bigoted

about religion . . . We enjoyed ourselves as young children of the village. That is why Wusasa had a lot of effect on me. If I did any trip (especially in that part of the country) unless I finished up at Wusasa - to breathe the air - I had not really come round. And this is the reason - it was home; it was a root. If anything, I do not know my home as much as I know Wusasa. I understand the language but I do not speak it well.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Gowon was to leave this environment to go to a boarding school next door to Wusasa.

## Notes

- 1 Pa Yohanna Gowon was an Angas Chief until 'His chance meeting with the English Missionary Group, Church Missionary Society, got Pa Gowon converted to Christianity . . . for turning against Idol worship Pa Gowon lost his chieftaincy, his wives divorced him, and he was ready to be a roving Evangelist. His second marriage was to Saraya Gowon, Yakubu's mother.' This account was contained in a paragraph written by a member of the Gowon family, Dr Dauda Gowon, 'We said Power Corrupts' (mimeograph) University of Utah, Logan, Utah, USA
- 2 Interview with General Gowon.
- 3 *Ibid*
- 4 Mallam Nuhu Bayero was described during the funeral oration of Pa Yohanna Gowon as the latter's 'number one friend'. Discussion with Mallam Bayero supports his warmth of feeling for the Gowon family. It is strongly believed that Mallam Bayero lost the opportunity of becoming the Emir of Zaria, in part because he was suspected of being a Christian
- 5 Interview, *op. cit.*
- 6 Pa Y. Gowon had a child by his earlier marriages. His contact with the members of the main family is only peripheral and occasional. The author was not able to trace the child
- 7 Interview
- 8 *Ibid*
- 9 The writer remembers vividly an incident in August 1978. Madam Saraya Gowon had been hospitalized for exhaustion and fever, but she was insistent upon going home to her farm because, according to her, she was feeling quite well. It took a big deal between Daniel Gowon and the doctors to convince her that it was in her interest to rest in bed at least for a while.
- 10 Interview
- 11 A pertinent portion of our interview should be stated here:  
Elaigwu - Don't you drink?  
Gowon - Nothing much, in fact, talking about that, I remember the Lt Colonel Ademulegun was threatening that those who do not drink (alcohol) certainly would not get on in the Nigerian Army. And I remember I got up and said 'Sir! My God, if that is the standard or the yardstick with which you are going to judge officers, then God help the Nigerian Army and God help us.' And I remember that he was red, furious and angry with me. Honestly I was scared by his reaction

It does seem though that Daniel Gowon is the most notable rebel in the

regard. He drinks and generously offers it to friends. In a number of ways though religious, Daniel may be regarded as the rebel in the family, even though he is the 'Rear Guard Commander' looking after the affairs of the family now.

12 We shall be discussing this coup later and therefore will not go into it here.

13 I remember the first time I met Daniel Gowon was in April 1976. A lady friend of mine had expressed her interest in visiting Pa Yohanna Gowon's tomb. I was a bit worried because I had thought that coming only a few months after the anti-Gowon fad in the country (after the abortive Dimka coup) members of Gowon's family would not tolerate strangers in their compound. While I had always intended writing a biography of Yakubu Gowon since my field research in Nigeria (1973-74), I had never met a member of his family. However I decided we should just go and take a peep at the tomb from the main road by the house. We did that. Daniel saw us, came out, cheerfully greeted us and asked us in for a drink, even before we had introduced ourselves. How could he have known that we were not detectives or 'spies'? By the time we got out two hours later, we had also had the opportunity of seeing his mother - we were pleasantly surprised. I had similar experiences with Kande, Rachael, Maryamu - and in 1978 with Yakubu Gowon himself.

14 Interview with General Gowon

15 *Ibid.*

16 'I calculated my birth date from my record of baptism - probably while I was schooling at Wusasa. I used to have a record and I have seen it. I then figured that (as was the usual practice) I must have been about a week old (born on a market day at Garam - usually held on Friday). What I did then was to calculate this date backward to the Market day (Friday) and arrived at the date 19 October, 1934' (*Interview with General Gowon*)

There was no ambiguity as to the year or month of birth, this exercise in elementary arithmetic was directed at ascertaining the appropriate date of his birth. Many Nigerians of the generation caught in transition between colonial rule and independence, did not have their dates of birth recorded - a result of the very low level of literacy then. A certificate of declaration of age of Yakubu Gowon is in the file at Barewa College. The declaration was made on February 12th, 1954, by Yakubu's uncle, Mr Barnabas Gompwell (52 years then); it stated that Yakubu was born on 19th October, 1934.

17 Interview with General Gowon

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4

# From Barewa to Barracks

Little Yakubu Gowon came into Government College (now Barewa College), Zaria with high expectations which were soon to receive an initial big shock. He had his Middle IV at Wusasa and was hoping to get into Form Four at Government College. But he was admitted to Form Three and was given the option of accepting or quitting. It was a moment of crisis, for Gowon wanted to finish his school quickly so that he could earn some money to help his family. Yet here was a year's delay on his plans.<sup>1</sup>

Frustrated and confused, Gowon returned to Wusasa to seek his father's advice. His father gave him simple advice: 'put it into prayer and the Lord will guide you right.' But in addition Pa Gowon told his son that he thought it would be more advisable for him to go back to the college and repeat Form Three. Gowon's headmaster at Wusasa, Mr Lynn Roberts, also helped to convince him about the wisdom of going back to school, especially given Gowon's youth. Thus in 1959 Gowon 'stuck on to Government College, Zaria.' But he soon found the college a very enjoyable setting. Some of his Wusasa schoolmates also went to Barewa in the same year or a little bit later, even though these were his juniors, by class. Among these Wusasa schoolboys were - Yusufu Loga, Benjamin Ishyaku and Garba Yaroson. Gowon really enjoyed his years at the college and talks about his institution with great nostalgia.<sup>2</sup>

Academically, Gowon was a solid average student. At the interview for admission into Government College, the Principal Education Officer observed that Gowon 'appeared very intelligent and was able to answer my questions alertly and intelligibly. I think he is a very suitable type for secondary school.'<sup>3</sup> His work in Forms Three and Four show satisfactory performance especially in Geography, Biology/Chemistry and Workshop Practice. In fact, Gowon had the best geography result in the School's Senior Cambridge Examination in his final year. He performed fairly well in his Arabic classes as well.

It may be useful to give an indication of the general assessment of Gowon by his Headmaster and Principal in his years at Government

College. His Headmaster's remarks in his first year (i.e., Form Three) was that he was a 'polite, good sportsman' while the Principal observed that Gowon 'was promising: should be a useful member of the School.' In Form Four (1951), Gowon's Headmaster wrote that he - 'possesses plenty of interests. A reliable Room prefect/strong in games - satisfactory.' His Principal just noted, 'good.' In his fifth year (1952) the Headmaster observed that Gowon was, 'very promising. He has many strong points in all school games and outdoor activities,' while the Principal scored Gowon 'very satisfactory', even though he pointed out - 'I have worried him to pay more attention to his classroom work. I know he has worked hard in the athletics field, but he must strike a balance.'

Finally, his last year (1953) reports were interesting because they showed the school authority's summation of its impression of the student. Gowon's Headmaster reported that Gowon was a House Vice-Captain and was 'always alert and light-hearted.' He also noted that Gowon had a 'charming disposition' and was captain of athletics with school colours for athletics, football and hockey. The Principal, Mr A.W.A. Spicer, observed that Gowon had improved in his lessons and was 'a good influence in the athletics field - but he must take care not to get too conceited.' This was his report on 30th May, 1953. His final report on Gowon of 12th December 1953 reads thus: 'He returns next term to work for Army Entrance exam. An excellent boy who should turn out to be a good army officer.'<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps Gowon's greatest impact at Government College, Zaria was in the sphere of sports. He made his first mark in athletics when in his first year at Barewa (and still a Junior) he was able to participate in the Senior's cross-country competition. He succeeded, to the amazement of many of his mates, in beating all participants except Dan Azum - the best school distance runner. From then on, his participation in school games became more frequent. At times, it was very clear, as the Principal's report and Gowon's performances showed, that sports took a heavy toll on his studies. For two years Gowon was the school's athletics captain and participated in activities such as the pole vault, long jump, hurdles, mile, 880 yards, cross-country, etc. He was never good at sprints or cricket, otherwise young Gowon was a star member of the School's first XI football and hockey teams. He took an active part in boxing tournaments, even at inter-school level.

On balance, Gowon was an average student academically and a star in sports. A bit more time devoted to his academic work would have put him well above average because he had the potentialities, but needed more concentration than he had deployed in his academic work. Yet he came out well in his senior Cambridge exams with many credits.

Like every active student, Gowon was involved in school administration. He was a house Vice-Captain and the President of the School's Prefect Committee (an equivalent of the Headboy in many Nigerian Secondary Schools). It was this latter position which nearly got him thrown out of the college. The prefect's committee was concerned with how to improve the school food and discipline, and also wanted to secure additional facilities. An informal committee was recognized and respected by the school authorities. In his last year in school Gowon had been elected as the President of the committee.

But it happened that his tenure of office coincided with a school boys' strike against cooks for constantly cooking late and at times causing students to go to classes without breakfast. Gowon's attempt to curb this strike was misconstrued by the Principal who thought it was an attempt at organizing serious student disobedience. It took two of his teachers (Mr Ridley and Mr S.B. Baker) one of whom had eavesdropped on the committee's deliberations, to correct the Principal's interpretation of the situation. In effect it saved Gowon his career. He could have been expelled in his last year in school - a disaster, given his concern for his family and its echoes of poverty which never ceased haunting him, even in his college compound. Like most students he had occasional fracas with his teachers, such as his history master, Mr O'Neal, and one or two others. But on the whole Gowon maintained very good relations with both staff and students.

With his secondary education completed in 1954, Gowon had to think about his future. The army was not his first choice. After his secondary education, young Gowon felt he had had enough of school - after all, there were many Teacher Training Colleges (TTC) graduates who were teaching and earning money. This appealed very much to the young man at the initial decision-making stage. He had wanted to be a teacher for two purposes:

- (1) to repay the kindness of the missionaries who had given all members of his family free education at Wusasa, and
- (2) to help stave off the unavoidable pangs of poverty that had bugged his family.

Yet, even as far back as his primary school days, Gowon had thought of reading medicine. He admired Dr E.T. Mess and Dr Kelsey who had given Dr Ishaya Audu the inspiration to study medicine. But in 1948, almost all members of his family suffered from one form of ulcer or another and the sight of this put him off. It cancelled medicine from his list of career interests. The thought of becoming an engineer flickered through his mind, but Gowon was

aware of his inconsistent interest in mathematics to nourish this idea. In all his expressions of interest, teaching as a profession was the most perennial of his interests. His interest in teaching persisted throughout his school days and after.

However, his Principal, Mr A. W. A. Spicer and Vice-Principal, Mr Russell, constantly encouraged him to go into the army.<sup>5</sup> Some of Mr Spicer's ex-students (including Zachariya Maimalari) from the college had been commissioned into the Nigerian Army and he wanted Akubolu to join them. The sensation created among students when these ex-students (commissioned as officers) visited the school, must have made an impression on the Principal. Like most teachers, he was obviously proud of the performance of his students.

But Gowon could not make up his mind. In the end he opted for:

- 1) prayer; and
- 2) a toss among professions

As the only ways out of the tough but crucial decision he had to make. He prayed and then wrote a number of professions – teaching, engineering, medicine, and army on pieces of paper which he subsequently slipped into his Bible and prayed again. With his eyes closed he picked from among the pieces of paper – and he picked on the 'army'. His mind was now made up on trying to get into the army. Gowon then went to his father to inform him of his decision. If Gowon had received his father's blessing readily, his mother was scared stiff about the idea of her son getting into the army.<sup>6</sup> But young Gowon did not care very much about his mother's apprehension even though he perfectly understood her feelings. As far as he was concerned, he was a boy and not a girl, and his father's decision was more important in the situation he found himself.

Gowon then went to school to inform his Vice-Principal of his final decision. His name had not been on the original list of student interviewees sent to the Army Depot in Zaria. But the Vice-Principal was so delighted that Gowon had made up his mind at last to join the army that he gave the young man a note to the army officer in charge of the interview.<sup>7</sup> This was how Gowon joined his other classmates – Sunday Awoniyi, Shuaibu Paiko, Sule Kurfi and five others for the first interview for the army. Of all the nine boys from Government College who went to the interview, Gowon was the only one who got commissioned in the end.

After his school certificate examinations, Gowon had to return to the college for the first term (January–April 1954), to read for his army entrance examination. He thereafter proceeded to Tuwan (in Pankshin Division, as it was called) to spend some time with his father's people. It was in Pankshin that he got a telegram informing

him that he had passed his army examination. Gowon then reported to Kaduna where he was interviewed by the Brigade Commander and Captain (later Brigadier) Bassey.

In May 1954 Gowon reported for another army interview in Lagos before proceeding to the Regular Officers Special Training School (ROSTS), in Teshie, Ghana. In his batch were four other Nigerians: Arthur Unegbe, Patrick Anwuna, Alexander Madiebo and Michael Okwechime.

At the end of the course, he and his colleagues took the West African Command Selection Board examination to qualify them for further training in Britain. The group duly arrived in Britain and found themselves faced with yet another test - the War Office Selection Board (WOSB). On passing this examination, Gowon went to Eton Hall in Chester (in January-February 1955). Half-way through the course, another test was taken - the Regular Commission Board (RCB) examination, in which Gowon was the only Nigerian to pass at this sitting. Having scaled over this examination, he could now proceed to Sandhurst for his regular course.<sup>8</sup> He was later joined in September 1955 by the other Nigerians at Sandhurst after they had passed their RCB examinations in July 1955.

The Sandhurst training started from September 1955 through December 21st 1956. It was a hectic fifteen month course which saw Gowon as a cadet sergeant (quite a mark then). There was no doubt that Gowon was captivated by the rich history and aura of this institution as one of the best military academies of the world. He loved his period at Sandhurst and cherished the acquaintances he made there. On December 21st, 1956, however, he graduated from Sandhurst at a passing out parade taken by the British Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Gerald Templer, whose exhortation still remains verdant in Gowon's mind: 'Gentlemen, now that you are going into the world, I wish you good luck and good hunting.' And so Gowon became a Second Lieutenant at midnight, 21st December, 1956.

Second Lieutenant Gowon now went to the Young Officers Course at Hythe from January to March, 1957 and to Warminster, March to June, 1957. He finally returned to Nigeria in July 1957. On his return, he had the impression that he was going to be posted to Kaduna - an idea he very much welcomed since it would get him close to his family in Zaria (only 48 miles away). But he was posted to the Fourth Battalion, The Queen's Own Nigerian Regiment at Ibadan. Gowon could not have been more furious at this posting, given the fact that he had actually dispatched some of his belongings to Kaduna. Yet he ended up enjoying his stay at Ibadan. It was the beginning of Gowon's working life in the southern part of Nigeria - an experience which was to be of immense help to him very much later in life.

A young and ebullient officer, Gowon like most new graduates was very idealistic. In the first few months, he found no enthusiasm at work in the battalion. He observed that the battalion was inefficient, with no battalion and company training programmes and felt that most of the officers were more interested in playing polo. He condemned this. But he was soon to learn the limits of idealism. The refusal by a group of officers (of which Gowon was one) to go and sign the Governor's Visitors Book at Ibadan gave them a good taste of military discipline. Gowon, D. Tuck and Colin Furneaux were given seven days 'extra-orderly officer' duty,<sup>9</sup> thus giving the other officers a week free of orderly duties. Gowon thus found that criticizing his Adjutant openly did not pay. The Adjutant had had his own back on Second Lieutenant Gowon.

Luckily Gowon's Commanding Officer did not stay long to write a confidential report on him. He was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel Ken Wilson who saw to training programmes in the battalion. In March 1958, Lt Gowon went back to Teshie, Ghana, this time for a '3 inch Mortar Course,' which lasted till May 4, 1958. The next year saw him off to the United Kingdom for another course. From May to August, 1959, Yakubu studied at the Support Arms Wing at Netheravon, in Wiltshire. On his return, Lieutenant Colonel Rolo Price, his new Commanding Officer made him the Adjutant of the Fourth Battalion.

Gowon was off again in January to May, 1960 for the Southern Cameroon Campaign as a platoon commander. In November of the same year he was sent in the Nigerian contingent to the Congo (Zaire) and only returned to Nigeria in June 1961.

On his return, Gowon was posted to the army headquarters as a Staff Officer. He was still not posted to the Northern Region and he seemed to have been enjoying his stay in the southern part of the country. He had no problem getting on in his career, not because he begged for promotions<sup>10</sup> but because he enjoyed his vocation and was a keen worker. Many of his colleagues confirm this assessment of Gowon. He had imbibed one aspect of the tradition of British officers serving outside their country - one did not marry until one was well-seasoned in one's profession. Thus Gowon never thought about marriage until he was a captain in the army. Even then he did not marry. Being a bachelor made it a lot easier for Gowon to attend many courses his married colleagues often hesitated to accept. In addition, his superiors often looked to 'Jack the bachelor' for such courses, in the light of problems usually encountered by the army in sending married people away. This was partly responsible for the numerous courses Yakubu Gowon attended. He was perhaps one of the best trained, if not the best trained army officer in the Nigerian Army in his time.

In addition, Gowon was a dedicated soldier. He had performed so effectively in the Congo (Zaire) that his battalion Commander even recommended him for a Military Cross - a recommendation which did not go through and which he knew nothing about until 1973.<sup>11</sup> As a reward for his dedication, his Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rolo Price recommended him for Staff College in 1962 very much earlier than his peers in the Nigerian Army and even in the British Army. This was why Gowon attended the Staff College course at Camberley in 1962 together with Major Kur Mohammed who was much his senior. Gowon was then a Captain. For Gowon, 'this was more of a reward than any other course I had attended.'<sup>12</sup> The course turned out to be one of the most useful experiences he acquired.

Gowon returned to Nigeria in January 1963 and was called to the Congo (Zaire) on duty as the Brigade Major of the Third Nigerian Brigade, Luluaborg. He was promoted Lt-Colonel on his return from Zaire in 1963 and appointed the Adjutant-General of the Nigerian Army - the first Nigerian to hold that post. It was a well-deserved promotion, a recognition of Gowon's dedication to work.<sup>13</sup> In his position as the Adjutant-General, Yakubu established very good relations with soldiers; he was well known among young officers in the army - a relationship which was later to add credibility to his authority in a crisis situation.

In May 1965, Gowon the course maniac was chosen to attend yet another one - his last in the Nigerian Army. He attended the Joint Services Staff College at Lartimer, Chesham, Buckinghamshire from May to December 1965.<sup>14</sup> It was, as usual, a course he cherished very much.

Thus from Barewa College (Government College), Zaria, to the barracks Yakubu Gowon the student experienced a dramatic transition in his life and within eleven years had made a mark in his chosen vocation. In addition, he had attended many courses, and it is doubtful if any other Nigerian Army officer in his days had so much training. As Nigeria's *Daily Sketch* once observed in its souvenir edition: 'Few Nigerian officers have thus passed through a more crowded series of training courses. Fewer still were better qualified for the elevation he received later . . . Clearly he had achieved comparative greatness in the army by his own effort.'<sup>15</sup>

From Barewa to the barracks was also a leap from a period of indecision about career options to one of decisiveness and intense training in the military. By a propitious coincidence, such as found in Shakespearian plays, the toss and prayer which led to the choice of military career had unforeseen consequences for Yakubu as a person and for Nigeria as a nation. Thus far Gowon's career had not been very much affected by the political milieu in which he had operated.

The dictates of the political were soon to be heard loud and clear, however, and Gowon had little or no time to wait, consider, pray and toss for lucky choices. What was this political milieu with its accompanying experiences?

## Notes

### 1 As Gowon reminisced:

But honestly, I was feeling the pinch of our poverty and I wanted really to finish very quickly so that I could start work and be able to help the family. One of the reasons for not being a boarder (at Wusasa) was that you would have had to pay some fees. Of course, father could not afford to pay our fees and so that was why none of us was able to go to boarding school except Ibrahim and Peter – my two eldest brothers. The girls were allowed to go to boarding school. But the boys could stay at home and walk to school or run to school.

(Interview: August 1978)

### 2 Gowon: 'I had a very wonderful four years – 1950, 51, 52, and 53 at Government College, Zaria. From the date I came, right through, I was really happy with everyone.'

(Interview, August 1978)

### 3 Remark by the Principal Education Officer, dated 22nd November, 1949 in the personal file, *Yakubu Gowon* at Barewa College, Zaria.

### 4 The essence of delving into Gowon's school report is to stage a departure from the usual trend in biographies which tend to cover most of the negative characteristics of the actor's early life. Here we have laid bare Yakubu Gowon's reports and yet he comes out pretty well. (The documents on him are still at Barewa College for a cross-check).

### 5 This was corroborated by his sister's interview with Mr Arnold Zeitlin of *West Africa Wailer*, 115, 23rd September, 1966 – shortly after Gowon became Nigeria's Head of State. Mr Zeitlin wrote: 'Mrs Audu said Lt Col Gowon entered the army on the advice of his headmaster at the Government School in Zaria.' (*Ibid.*, p. 5)

### 6 Her first son, Ibrahim Gowon had died in the Second World War, thus her apprehension was perfectly understandable to Yakubu. He empathized with her but had to do what he thought best in the circumstances.

### 7 In fact, the English Army Captain who interviewed him asked Yakubu why he had just made up his mind. In answer, Yakubu merely said, 'I had wanted to be sure.'

### 8 While waiting to get into Sandhurst, Gowon took a short break and then joined Anzio Company to start his pre-Sandhurst training with other British cadets who were already there.

### 9 This was duty as an orderly officer for seven days, doing mess work.

### 10 In his book, Gowon's course-mate, Alexander Madicbo stated:

Gowon for unknown reasons has always been very popular with the British authorities both during his training in Britain and throughout his military service in Nigeria. For this reason, his progress in the army was so remarkable and extraordinary that even his fellow Northern officers were beginning to

grumble. For instance when he was chosen to attend the Camberley Staff College, England, in January, 1962, Major Pam, a Jos officer senior to him called him a 'sneaky sucker.'

Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers 1980) p. 5

Every available evidence to the author shows that Gowon's charming and amiable personality, his dedication to work and his sensitivity, endeared him to most of his acquaintances. It was therefore not strange that he was popular with British Authorities. With so many courses in his record and his good performances at every post, it was not surprising that he had rapid progress in the army.

- 11 Gowon did not know he was recommended for the Military Cross until his former C.O., Rolo Price, told him so in 1973 during his official visit to Britain as Nigerian Head of State. His recommendation for the Camberley Staff College Course was perhaps a substitute for a Military Cross which was not awarded to him.
- 12 Gowon himself regarded this course as a 'reward' for his dedication to duty. He never claimed he deserved it at that point in time. The quotation in the text was recorded in August 1978, two years before Madiebo's book was published.
- 13 Daily Sketch (Ibadan) Yakubu Gowon: Soldier-Statesman, October 19, 1970, p. 16 (A Souvenir).
- 14 Contrary to the report by a Correspondent titled: 'Portrait of the General' in *World Africa*, 11th June, 1973, p.761, this course was not in *Pakistan*. It was the Joint Services Staff College at Lartimer, Chesham, Buckinghamshire, England, that he returned from only to meet the January 15, 1966 coup. This point is minor, but useful in setting records right.
- 15 Daily Sketch, *Yakubu Gowon: Soldier-Statesman, op. cit.*, p. 16

## Chapter 5

# The Meteoric Upshot: The Creature of Crisis

... I am a creature of crisis. It is in crisis that the best of me comes out. I may seem soft when there is no crisis but different when there is crisis. It is under crisis that you do not have to bother about unnecessary details.<sup>1</sup>

On completing his course at the Joint Service Staff College, Gowon decided to return home by ship. It was on his homeward journey on the ship that Gowon and his shipmates discussed the possibilities of a military coup in Nigeria. His position was that there was no likelihood of a coup in Nigeria, even though he was a bit worried that the spate of coups in Africa was getting too close to Nigeria for comfort. He, however, expressed the hope that if anything like that happened in Nigeria, the few loyal ones would help to restore normalcy.<sup>2</sup>

There is a sense in which it can be said that Gowon was politically naive.<sup>3</sup> The period between 1963–65 had seen gross intemperance by political actors in Nigeria and Gowon had once publicly recounted how in 1964, Lt-Col Ojukwu had approached Lt-Col Ejoor and himself to help take over the government.<sup>4</sup> Yet until he arrived in Nigeria on 13th January, 1966, Gowon had little or no information about the Nigerian political scene. Except for letters he got from his friends such as James Pam (who had succeeded him as Adjutant-General) he hardly knew anything about the nature of politics in Nigeria after his departure in May 1965. He seemed to have had very little interest in politics and was very detached from the political arena.

He deprecated military participation in politics and kept himself very aloof from the politics of the nation – a typical British tradition of separation between the barracks and the political arena. As he pointed out later; 'I was anti-coup and I am still anti-coup. My attitude has always been anti-coup.' If Gowon had been socialized enough to respect the borders of the barracks, he was soon to learn that in very fluid situations the concept of an apolitical professional army was difficult to sustain empirically.

On his return, Gowon was posted as the Commander of the Second Battalion of the Nigerian Army, based at Ikeja. He was to relieve Lt-Col Hilary Njoku who was going on posting. Of course this meant that he had to serve under Brigadier Zachariya Maimalari, the Commander of the Second Infantry Brigade, Lagos. Gowon was to be initially booked by Major Ifeajuna (Brigade Major of the Second Brigade) at Ikoyi Hotel. In fact, for Gowon, this was a perfect arrangement since it was close to his friend Lt-Col Pam's house at Ikoyi and he could have easily walked or driven to the house whenever he wanted.<sup>5</sup> But Lt-Col James Pam thought differently. He encouraged Gowon to get to Ikeja, close to his battalion since he was due to take over as Commander on January 15, 1966. Gowon took this advice but it was not clear that Major Ifeajuna had foreknowledge of the change in Gowon's temporary accommodation arrangement. This proved later to be a positive and decisive trick of fate for Gowon.

He moved to an unoccupied, but detached house near Major Igboba's<sup>6</sup> house. This was merely a temporary measure until Lt-Col Njoku had moved to his new post. While Brigadier Maimalari, Lt-Col Pam and the soldiers at Ikeja barracks knew about Gowon's presence, many of his other colleagues were confused about his housing arrangement. Some publications later even claimed that Gowon was staying at a girl-friend's house and that this later saved his life. This was not true. Gowon lived at Ikeja all throughout the period but not many knew this. After all, he had only arrived in Nigeria on January 13, 1966.

Gowon remembers very vividly the evening of January 14, 1966. His new brigade commander, Brigadier Maimalari, had invited him to a party and he felt very reluctant to go. But he changed his mind when he was informed that the party was to welcome him to the brigade and bid farewell to the outgoing C.O. of the Second Battalion and to some other staff who were going on courses or being posted to other units.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Yakubu's Ibo girl-friend at Ibadan, Miss Edith Ike, had come all the way to welcome him back home. He had planned to take Edith Ike back to Ibadan that night, in the company of Lt-Col Abogo Largema, the C.O. of the Fourth Battalion. At the party, he declared his intention to get to Ibadan that night in the hearing of Ifeajuna, Oji and a few others. Despite appeals by his colleagues (such as Maimalari) to stay till the next day because of 'Operation Wetite'<sup>8</sup> on the Lagos-Ibadan road, Gowon did not change this statement. This added to the confusion about his whereabouts later.

In the end, he could not see Largema to discuss the details of the journey; he was tired from his long trip by ship to Nigeria and above all else, had to get ready for a ceremonial parade to mark his

assumption of office as the new C.O., early the next day – January 15. He therefore, gave up the idea of going to Ibadan that night, without telling anyone.

After midnight, on his way out of the party, with Edith, Gowon remembers vividly having met the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army (G.O.C.) Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi. General Ironsi's remarks are still verdant in his memory. Ironsi had told Gowon and Edith: 'Well have a nice time . . . you never know tomorrow.' Yakubu then turned to his girl-friend and asked: 'Did you hear what the General said?' The girl said, 'No'. He then repeated the statement to her and she retorted that she thought it was rude. Gowon replied that it was not only rude but vulgar.<sup>9</sup> Both of them then proceeded to Ikeja barracks where Gowon was lodging.

A few hours after their return, Gowon was woken up by a commotion at Ikeja barracks. He peeped through the window and saw Captain Martin Adamu, the Battalion Adjutant from whom he enquired about the commotion. He was told that there had been a coup. Gowon became furious and chided the Captain, 'Do you realize there is a coup? Why did you not tell me?' He recalled much later that Captain Adamu looked very startled and it seemed that the real implications of what was happening had just dawned on him. He then informed Gowon that the G.O.C., General Ironsi was at the barracks.

For the first time, the implications of Ironsi's statement at the party dawned on Gowon and he became suspicious of Ironsi and even of his Ibo girl-friend, Edith. He later found that his suspicion of Edith was misplaced. However, given his suspicion then, he quietly dressed up and went to the battalion headquarters to see Ironsi. Ironsi then briefed him on the coup.

Gowon then turned to Captain Adamu to know if he had informed the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Maimalari of the situation. He was informed that the telephone lines were out of order and that they could not contact anyone. He tried the telephone himself and found it was a worthless effort.

After his briefing, General Ironsi gave orders to the effect that it would take two hours before the first Unit could get into town. This was the point at which Gowon really reacted. He asked about the approximate time the coup took place and found that the exercise had begun at about 3:00 a.m. He could not understand why it should take two more hours before the rebels should be tracked down. He then turned to his officers and tartly said, 'These people have got two hours ahead of us and we are giving them two more? I give everyone of you 15–20 minutes to get ready.' He then turned to the General and said, 'I am going.'

Curiously enough, Gowon observed that Col Njoku<sup>10</sup> who had

said nothing all this time then asked him, 'If something happens you who would look after the boys?' Gowon then retorted that if the officers who had been killed meant nothing to him (Njoku) then the men who were left meant everything to him.<sup>11</sup> Gowon had planned that since he had not yet taken over command of the battalion Lt-Col Njoku could stay behind and look after things at Ikeja. He would then take a detachment to Lagos Island and if there was need, call for assistance later. Once the situation had been brought under control, the G.O.C. would then be called to the headquarters from Ikeja where Ironsi would remain meanwhile.

Going back to his house, Gowon dressed and left without waking Edith or telling her about what had happened. He had not used his uniforms for a long while but in a short time got himself kitted up and moved with his men into Lagos.

Meanwhile an advance platoon under Lt William G. Walbe had been sent to Lagos to observe and report on events there, but not to do anything. Lt Walbe ended up being detained at the Federal Guard by Lt Paul Tarfa until Gowon arrived. Gowon's detachment had the responsibility of dealing with the situation.

His detachment headed immediately for the Prime Minister's house and found that he had been kidnapped. His only hope when he assured Mallam Tanko Galadima that the Prime Minister would not be harmed, was that the mutineers would use Tafawa Balewa and others to extract concessions and later release them. He later found this a fatuous hope. His men then took over the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) house, with strict instructions that under no condition was any soldier to be allowed in there without Gowon's authority. His pursuit of the mutineers led him to Col Pam's house where the sight of his sobbing wife and children told the whole story. Maimalari's house was spattered with the blood of another soldier (not Maimalari's). A check at the house of the Defence Minister Inua Wada, showed that he was not in the country.

From there the Gowon detachment proceeded to the Officers' Mess where it was thought the real operation was to be mounted. Gowon's first thought was to throw a grenade into the Mess. He changed his mind and decided to force an entry. This probably saved Fani-Kayode's life. The detachment found Fani-Kayode (who was to be used to broadcast by the coup makers) in the Mess.<sup>13</sup> He was taken to one of the guest houses in Ikoyi as none of the coup-makers could be found inside the Mess. In fact, the rebels had raced out across the golf course.

At the Federal Guard's, Gowon's detachment released William Walbe and Gowon was able to bring the soldiers under control. Luckily his soft but stern voice, as the former Adjutant-General, was familiar to most soldiers. This helped very much in his attempt to get

the soldiers to carry out his orders in the confused state of affairs in Lagos in this period. Having established control at the Federal Guard, the detachment then established a base at the Parliament building, but problems of communication led to their moving to the Police Force Headquarters at the Lion Building, Obalende, Lagos.

Hectic as it was, the quick movement into Lagos did work. The rebels were on the run. They had hardly anticipated a quick reaction to their attempted coup. Gowon and his men had acted swiftly to abort the coup. He was very quick in getting telephone and radio services restored – which enabled him to get in touch with all other Nigerian Army units with instructions not to take orders from anyone but himself. He succeeded in bringing the situation under control, except in the North where Nzeogwu was fully in control. Even here Gowon and Ironsi got on the line to Lt-Col Madiebo with instructions on how to handle Major Nzeogwu.<sup>14</sup>

Before he went to Lagos Island Gowon had left instructions with Major Henry Igboha to block all major exits out of Lagos, such as the airport, Ikorodu Road, etc. Major Igboha and others worked very hard and arrested some rebels – some of them on Carter bridge, but most of the senior ones among the rebels escaped. In fact, a group of them under Ademoyega had gone to the NBC a little after the takeover of the place by the Gowon detachment and were turned away. After a severe chase, Ademoyega escaped to Enugu. Some of the young officers such as Nyam, on seeing the situation, abandoned Ademoyega. Ifeajuna also escaped to Enugu initially and later on went to Ghana from where he was repatriated to Nigeria after a promise of amnesty that was never kept.<sup>15</sup>

On the whole, Banjo and Ojukwu were suspect in Lagos. Ojukwu's ambivalence came out very clearly after the coup. Madiebo claimed that when he called Lt-Col Ojukwu to brief him on the events in Kaduna, 'Ojukwu already knew all' and only replied with 'a series of "good", "good", "good".'<sup>16</sup> Later on the same day (15th January) General Ironsi announced that the troops of the Fifth Battalion in Kano under Lt-Col Ojukwu were 'Now loyal to the Federal Government.' There is an implication that the troops were not loyal to the Federal Government before then.

The important point was that the main seat of the coup in the South had crumpled. Gowon and his men, in the afternoon, called the G.O.C. down to Lagos, with an escort, to take over command. Most Nigerians were not aware of the role Gowon played in putting down the first coup except for the soldiers who were involved.

From a narrow escape, Gowon emerged as a defender of military loyalty to government, even though by January 17th, Nigeria emerged with a new regime, albeit a military one. The confusion as to his whereabouts and his declared intention to go to Ibadan on the

night of the 14th must have saved his life. Lt-Col Largema who was to accompany him to Ibadan had been killed. Lt-Col Pam with whom he had initially planned to stay was also killed. Gowon could have also been killed along with Pam. Ikoyi Hotel where Gowon was to be booked would not have been safe for him either; for Lt-Col Largema (the Commander of the Fourth Battalion at Ibadan), who was lodging at Ikoyi Hotel, was killed there.<sup>17</sup> For Gowon therefore it was a very narrow escape. His absence from Ikeja was interpreted, by some of those who did not know where he was, as an escape into hiding. It was much, much later that Edith Ike saw her boy-friend, to her great relief, alive and fit, even if tired.

True to his word, Gowon adhered strictly to his statement in the speech on his homeward journey to Nigeria that if there was a coup in Nigeria he hoped troops loyal to the government would restore government to normalcy. He had risen to the occasion in a situation of crisis. A creature of crisis from his childhood days, Gowon correctly observed about himself: 'So you see, as I said before, yes, I am a creature of crisis. It is in crisis that the best of me comes out. I may seem soft when there is no crisis but different when there is crisis. It is under crisis that you do not have to bother about unnecessary details.'

If Gowon was a creature of crisis and had risen to the occasion this time, he would soon have more crises with which to contend. Having done his duty, he withdrew to Ikeja to rest until he was later informed of his appointment as the new Chief of Staff, Nigerian Army. He had not participated in the discussions between Ironsi and the politicians - an area in which he was not interested. Like a good military officer, he answered the call of duty and withdrew.

But his withdrawal was only temporary. As a Midwest (now Bendel) Regional publication observed about the January coup: '... like Saturn, the January (1966) revolution devoured its own children and let loose the flood gates of a social and political convulsion of a magnitude which its architects would never have contemplated or dreamt of.'<sup>18</sup>

There was no doubt that the political stage had been violently shaken and no Nigerian could escape its ensuing convulsions, least of all Yakubu Gowon, caught up in the midst of it. A military regime of which Gowon was part had been established on January 17th, 1966 by General Ironsi. For the first time Nigerian officers - brothers but potential enemies in the barracks - had not only killed civilian leaders, but had slaughtered each other with reckless abandon. Could the Nigerian Army ever be the same? Could lasting peace be restored to the Nigerian political setting as Ironsi had promised the politicians when they reportedly handed over power to him? Were the military capable of managing crises effectively? Later events may help to answer our questions.

The important point here, is that our actor has been catapulted by crisis to a new level – that of the Chief of Staff of the Nigerian Army. Perhaps Nigeria's *Daily Sketch* was correct in its summation of this appointment when it stated: 'It is his personal achievement in the Army that led Major-General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, the former Supreme Commander, to select him for appointment as Army Chief of Staff a few weeks after the events of January 15, 1966. It was the crowning of a brilliant career which he had entered straight from school.'<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Interview, August 22, 1978.
- 2 Ironically the author also had similar discussions with Dr John Agi on January 7–8, 1966 in a train ride from Otukpo in Benue State to Lagos to attend classes at King's College, Lagos. Their conclusion was that Balewa commanded the confidence of the Nigerian Army, especially if one looked at the privileges the army enjoyed then. It was unlikely the army would intervene.
- 3 Please read General Danjuma's observations that the 'first ominous sign of the beginning of political divisions and loyalties taking hold within the army began to show up in 1964' in Lindsay Barrett, *Danjuma: The Making of a General* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1979 p. 35)
- 4 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Nigeria 1966* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1967) and see his interview with Adamu Ciroma, editor of *New Nigerian*. Also see, B.J. Dudley, *Instability and Political Order: Politics and Crisis in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press: 1973 p. 97)
- 5 While still in Britain, Gowon had written to his friend, Lt-Col James Pam asking if he could stay with him until his accommodation was ready at Ikeja. Unfortunately (or was it fortunately?) a family was staying at Lt-Col Pam's guest house and there was not really a room left for Gowon to lodge in and feel quite comfortable.
- 6 Major Igboba was second in command to Colonel Hilary Njoku.
- 7 Some authors claim that this party was to celebrate Maimalari's wedding to a new wife. As Gowon explained it, 'The party was not for a new wife, as you and I knew. It could have been one of the reasons – but it was more of an official party. I did not want to go to the party, but when this was explained, (i.e., that the party was in part for me) I had to go.'
- 8 This was the period when political thuggery made night travelling on the Lagos-Ibadan road very dangerous.
- 9 We have avoided quoting the whole sentence because of the apparent vulgarity of the statement. Perhaps, under a different situation, it was not unusual to hear vulgarities of this nature among soldiers in moments of lighter mood.
- 10 From interviews conducted by the author, there was no doubt among Northern officers that Hilary Njoku knew about the coup. He was suspected among Northern soldiers right from the beginning. Please note Captain Yakubu Danjuma's question to Captain Martin Adamu when he arrived at Ikeja barracks. He enquired why Lt-Col Njoku was still in command when the information from the army headquarters was that he was to have handed over command to Gowon. Lindsay Barrett, *op. cit.* p. 41. Also see Dudley, *op. cit.* p. 108 in which he claims

- that 'Both Lt-Cols Njoku and Ojukwu were thought to have known well by hand of the plan to overthrow the government . . . ' Ironsi's last appearance at Ikeja was also very suspicious and Gowon's initial reaction was understandable.
- 11 At this time not all the officers killed were known. But certainly Gowon knew of Maimalan's death and that of a few others and he was soon to find out more when he got to Lagos Island.
  - 12 Because they had been informed that the Officers' Mess was the seat of operations for the coup makers.
  - 13 B.J. Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 104 claims that the conspirators had arrested Fani-Kayode and took him to Lagos where they ran into a road block mounted by Ironsi's troops who arrested them and released Fani-Kayode. Gowon's account was that Fani-Kayode had been released and taken to a guest house at Ikoyi, from where he released him and took him to somewhere else in Ikoyi. It is very probable that Fani-Kayode was released finally from the coup-makers custody in their attempt to smuggle him out to their hiding place.
  - 14 Lt-Col Madiebo in his book *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (*op. cit.*, p. 25) confirmed that Ironsi had called him and handed him over to Gowon with details on how to bring Nzeogwu down. He claimed that Gowon had made several suggestions to him, 1) to 'Find sufficient troops to attack and destroy Nzeogwu which he turned down because the troops were under Nzeogwu's command and it was a popular revolution, and 2) that he 'Should find a doctor to sedate Nzeogwu while appearing to be treating his injured neck. Nzeogwu could then be brought down to Lagos in that state.' Madiebo claimed he also turned it down because a Northern doctor who was treating Nzeogwu would not have agreed to do so. He told Gowon that the coup was over in the North and that Nzeogwu was prepared to settle with Lagos 1) if he and his men were guaranteed safety for themselves and for the other participants in the coup 2) 'and [if] assurance [was given] that the aims of the revolution would be upheld at all times by the Lagos regime.' (p. 26)
  - 15 Dudley reports that Ifeajuna fled to Enugu 'where he is reported to have met and discussed with the Premier of the East, Dr Michael Okpara.' Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 104. Also see N.J. Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956-1966* (London: Methuen, 1971); R. Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authoritarianism and Revolt: 1960-67* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), and M. Dent 'The Military and Politics: A Study of the Relation between the Army and the Political Process in Nigeria,' in Kenneth Kirkwood (ed.) *St Anthony's Papers* (London: Clarendon Press, No. 2, 1970, pp. 113-139) - all have interesting aspects of the January coup and we do not need to get into the details here.
  - 16 Madiebo, *op. cit.*, p. 19
  - 17 Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 104 In my interview with Gowon, he said:

... it was Pam who insisted that I should not be hooked at a hotel but that I should go and stay near the battalion which I was going to take over as the Commanding Officer. So, this again, was the arrangement which saved my life. This was the arrangement. You see, Pam was taken from his house and killed. Yakubu Largema was booked at Ikoyi Hotel and they went to the Hotel to kill him and he was killed. So if I were staying at Ikoyi Hotel I might have been killed.

(Interview, May 1979 in London)

You see probably a lot of people were not sure that I was at the Ikeja Battalion. All the officers at Ikeja Battalion knew that I was at Ikeja but I had not taken over. I was to take over on the morning of the coup.

(Interview, May 1979)

- 18 Government of Midwestern Region, *The Nigerian Crisis and the Midwest Decision* (Benin. Department of Internal Affairs and Information, 1968, p. 2)
- 19 Daily Sketch, Yakubu Gowon. *Soldier-Statesman*, *op. cit.* , p. 14

## Chapter 6

# Bullets and Political Convulsion

... Those of us who have the privilege to serve this country must always bear in mind that we are only trustees for a limited time for our children and their off-spring.<sup>1</sup>

With the January 15 disturbances in the Nigerian military, things were never the same again.<sup>2</sup> Neither the army nor the country was the same again. This date marked the effective explosion of the military on to the Nigerian political arena. If Ironsi had not been part of the coup-planners, he had ended up being the beneficiary. After negotiations with members of Balewa's cabinet and other politicians, Ironsi announced that the politicians had handed over power to him to enable him to restore law and order.<sup>3</sup>

Ironsi's first reaction on coming to power was to suspend the legislative and executive bodies at the centre (in Lagos) and in the regions.<sup>4</sup> Under Decree No.1, 1966, the new Federal Military Government acquired the 'power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Nigeria or any part thereof with respect to any matter whatsoever.'<sup>5</sup> It also defined the powers of both the federal and regional governments. The military Governor of a region was 'not to make laws with respect to any federal matter included in the Exclusive Legislative List; he could not 'make laws with respect to any matter included in the concurrent legislative list' except 'with the prior consent of the Federal Military Government.' But the 'Military Government of a Region shall have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of that Region.'<sup>6</sup> There was ostensibly hardly any change in the division of functions except that regional governors had to consult the Federal Government before making laws on matters in the concurrent list. Federal laws attained expression in *decrees* while state laws were called *edicts*. Basically the regions maintained their autonomy.

At the federal level, two new institutions had emerged – the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council, both under the chairmanship of the Head of the Federal Military Government.<sup>7</sup> Membership of these two bodies was basically military, exc

for the presence of the Inspector General of Police, and later, the Federal Attorney General, in the Federal Executive Council. The Federal Executive Council (FEC) was responsible for legislation with regard to Federal matters. It was to 'exercise general direction and control over every department of the government of the Federation.'<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was the highest decision making body for the whole country, including the regions. Regional Governors were directly responsible to the Supreme Commander.

These were the basic structures of military government in Nigeria under General Ironsi. To help administer the regions, he appointed military governors – in the North, Lt-Col Hassan Katsina; Lt-Col Adekunle Fajuyi for the West; Lt-Col Chukwuemeka Ojukwu for the East and in the Midwestern region, Lt-Col David Ejoor.

It would seem that on coming to power, General Ironsi had at least two major options with regard to Nigeria's structural imbalance and problems of Federal-State relations. He could have embarked on institutional reorganization which emphasized centralization of powers at the federal centre to a greater extent than had existed, while maintaining the same regional structures, or he could have structurally reorganized the country by creating more states in Nigeria with less power than the former regions had.<sup>9</sup>

But General Ironsi did not act immediately. He waited for the dust to settle after the coup. As the dust settled, the nature of the coup became more suspicious to many Nigerians, and his subsequent actions only aggravated it. Initially, most Nigerians, (in spite of reservations in some quarters) saw the military coup as a relief. Even in the North, the attitude was one of 'wait and see.' Thus Ironsi had a favourable political climate within which to act.<sup>10</sup>

He took a middle of the road approach. He wanted the loyalty of the North (whose soldiers formed the bulk of the rank and file of the army) and yet he wanted to meet the demands of the South for more radical changes. He was attempting to conciliate the Northern Region which had lost its soldiers and leaders at Federal and regional levels, without alienating Southern support for the January coup as a revolutionary act – a death knell to Northern feudalism. He therefore left the regions to operate in the same way as in the civilian regime, except for modifications which were necessary by virtue of the military presence in the political system.

Like in most coups, the nature of the coup was very important because of its impact on the system later. It could lead to chains of coups as groups find some truth in the Rousseaurian adage that where might is right, any might that is greater than the first succeeds to its rights. Secondly, the ability of an incoming military regime to legitimize itself is very much dependent on the impressions it

creates on the populace. If legitimacy of military regimes does not emerge from the ballot box and its undercurrent of emphasis on the 'right to rule,' it should at least emerge from its ability to perform well in delivering the goods (as much as the political temperature of the system permits) - the aspect of 'ruling rightly.' This involves astute calculation of the timing of decisions and careful ranking of priorities. It can make much difference between support or alienation of support for a military regime which normally lacks popular institutions in which the population can participate.<sup>11</sup>

Some authors have suggested that one of Ironsi's problems emanated from the fact that he was not part of the coup-planning caucus and therefore did not share the ideals of the group.<sup>12</sup> This may well be true but it does not really explain Ironsi's vacillation after he had analyzed the ills of the nation himself in his broadcast to the nation. He knew the political situation before the coup and he also knew the expectations of the populace after the coup.

In a way, it may be argued that General Ironsi was a victim of circumstances - circumstances which required the quick use of his mental capacity and political subtlety - two traits Ironsi did not possess in adequate amounts. In some cases, the circumstances rendered him virtually impotent. The nature of the execution of the January coup had made Ironsi a suspect among Northern officers in the army. Ironsi having risen to power found himself a prisoner of a coup that had been undertaken largely by his kinsmen, the Ibo officers under Nzeogwu. Unfortunately the political and military leaders killed during the coup, except for Lt-Col Unegbe (Midwestern Ibo) were mainly from Northern and Western Regions.<sup>13</sup> It was not the coup itself but the way it was executed that created suspicions and stigmatized it with ethnic colouring. Of the senior officers of the ranks of Lieutenant-Colonel and above, the North lost four out of its five officers, (Gowon being the only survivor); the West lost two out of its six officers; the East lost none out of its seven officers and the Midwest lost one out of its four officers.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the mutual suspicions within the army, discipline was also brought to a fairly low ebb. Northern soldiers were furious. They wanted revenge, and Ironsi had to send his Army Chief of Staff, Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon round military establishments all over the country to explain the situation and calm rising tempers. On a number of occasions Gowon missed his FEC meetings in order to attend to military issues. The army had been badly shattered and it never really recovered from this shock for a long time. This was amply demonstrated by the refusal of the men of the Fourth Battalion to take orders from Major Nzefili who had been asked by Ironsi to take command after Lt-Col Largema had been killed in the January coup. Ironsi then reversed his appointment and chose Lt-Col

Joe Akahan to take command. It only showed that discipline within the army had broken down. It was yet to get worse. But Gowon tried his best to get the army back, and for him, it was a hectic time.<sup>15</sup>

Related to this was another dilemma for General Ironsi. He was the beneficiary of what had started out as a 'mutiny' and had ended as a military coup. As this was a mutiny (and as he had publicly described them as 'mutineers', 'rebels' and at other times 'dissidents') he, as Commander-in-Chief, had to punish the mutineers in order to restore discipline to the army and appease the North for the death of its military and political leaders. Yet, as a head of government, he found it difficult to punish the executors of a coup which (albeit by default) had brought him to power; it would have alienated the Southerners who saw it as a revolutionary act. In spite of advice from Gowon, he tried to remain impartial, but was soon subjected to the strains of the diverse centrifugal pulls of Nigerian society.

These political pulls within the system may have made Ironsi vacillate in making radical changes in Federal-Regional relations. In March, Ironsi had set up a Constitutional Review Study Group which was to study the constitutional problems of Nigeria and submit a report to the Constituent Assembly to be set up later. This committee under Chief Rotimi Williams, was to 'identify the constitutional problems in the context of one Nigeria.' He promised the nation that the form of government to be set up would only be established after consultation with the people, to be followed by a referendum.<sup>17</sup>

Ironsi also set up another commission under Mr F. Nwokedi (Sole Commissioner) to make proposals for the unification of Civil Services.<sup>18</sup> An Economic Committee was also established under Chief S.O. Adebó. It thus took Ironsi three months to make any political move, but actually five months for him to opt for greater centralization of power through unitarism.

On May 24, 1966, General Ironsi announced his programme to restructure the country, by his Decree No.34, 1966 which made Nigeria a unitary State: 'Nigeria shall on the 24th May 1966 . . . cease to be a federation and shall accordingly as from that day be a republic by the name of the Republic of Nigeria, consisting of the whole territory which immediately before that day was comprised in a federation.'<sup>19</sup> This May broadcast abolished federalism as a form of government in Nigeria. The former regions were abolished, and Nigeria was grouped into a number of territorial areas called provinces. Each region became known as 'group of provinces.' A National Military Government was established in place of Federal Military Government. There was to be a new economic plan.

Ironsi's rationale for this decree was that it was '. . . intended to remove the last vestiges of intense regionalism of the recent past, and to produce that cohesion in the government structure which is so

necessary in achieving and maintaining the paramount objective of the National Military Government, . . . national unity.<sup>20</sup>

He pointed out that this decree was to be 'entirely a transitional measure,' and was without prejudice to the 'constitutional and administrative arrangements to be embodied in the new constitution in accordance with the wishes of the people of Nigeria.'<sup>21</sup>

However, the most far-reaching aspect of Decree No.34 was the unification of the Civil Services of the regions. It declared that:

As from the appointed day, all officers in the Services of the Republic in a civil capacity shall be officers in a single service to be known as the National Public Service, and accordingly all persons who immediately before that day were members of the public services of the Federation or of the public service of a region shall on that day become members of the National Public Service.<sup>22</sup>

Provincial Public Service Commissions were to appoint all but the most Senior officers.

Thus, it took five months for Ironsi to wake from his slumber and to opt for greater centralization of political power: centralization through unitarism. It is not clear what public reaction would have been if this had been 'well timed,' that is to say, if it had been introduced before the dust which followed the coup had settled. There might have been less opposition to it. However, by May, suspicions had become rife that the January coup was an Ibo attempt to dominate Nigeria.<sup>23</sup>

The North was opposed to this decree and the Emirs and Chiefs told Ironsi so. In response, the National Military Government stressed the transitional nature of the decree and made it clear that 'it cannot be seriously emphasized [enough] that the Military Government can only run the government as a unified command. It cannot afford to run five governments and separate services as if it were a civilian regime.'<sup>24</sup> The North felt very much incensed by this reply.<sup>25</sup>

The concentration of political and economic power in the hands of Southern leaders had tilted the delicate Nigerian balance. Political power had been the North's safeguard against the South's economic and educational advantages. With the military coup that ended representative democracy the Northern Region's political advantage was destroyed. The South's advantage in the bureaucracy (which if anything was strengthened in authority by the coup) was greatly augmented. Thus, the efforts to strengthen and unify the Civil Services came to have political consequences. As a Northern Regional publication pointed out with reference to the Unification Decree No.34:

Now, nobody really objected to a unitary Government. It makes for one strong and united country. It creates a nation. But its implications must be understood quite clearly. One such implication is that all parts of the country should be at approximately the same stage of development. This meant, in the context of Nigeria, sinking money to raise the standard of education in the North to the level of the South. The Ibos . . . would never have this. To the average Southerners, in fact, a united Nigeria meant more job opportunities, while to the Northerners, it meant the deprivation of their means of livelihood by more articulate people.<sup>26</sup>

For the Northerners, the unification of the Civil Service was the most annoying aspect of the decree. It confirmed their suspicions of the Ironsi regime. For the Western and Northern Regions, it threatened their securities.<sup>27</sup> Both regions were unenthusiastic about the decree. On May 27, 1966, riots broke out in the North in which many Easterners (mainly Ibos) were killed. It was a reaction to what they regarded as a threat to their 'livelihood.' Perhaps the lesson of this communal instability for Ironsi was to show how very fragile his military constituency was. He could not use the military to put down these riots. It seemed most likely that the Northern other ranks in the military would have resented shooting their brothers – given the atmosphere of mutual suspicion in the country. Ironsi had to rely on the police force.

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued that in a country of great diversity in language, culture and levels of social mobilization, General Ironsi was certainly sowing the seeds of discord and political violence – an action which was to cost his life. To Ironsi and his advisers, the answer to Nigerian problems was to be found in a greater centripetal pull: greater centralization through unitary structures.

His haste in introducing the unitary constitution (without waiting for a report of the Commission he had appointed) gave the impression, correctly or erroneously, that he was under pressure. This decree was not extensively discussed at the Supreme Military Council or the Federal Executive Council. Ironsi and the Regional Governors seemed to have been the main architects of this decree. These two bodies were merely informed that the issue had been discussed with the governors and was acceptable to them.<sup>28</sup>

While we have argued above that Ironsi was partially a victim of Nigeria's socio-political circumstances, he aggravated the situation for himself by his political insensitivity and lack of foresight. An Ibo himself, his appointment of Ibos as his closest advisers raised questions about the credibility of his efforts to remain an impartial

leader.<sup>29</sup> Some of the advice he got from these aides must have worsened the situation for him. Perhaps the widening of his range of advisers would have given him a few disinterested insights into some of the issues he had to tackle. Gowon does not think Ironsi, as an individual, was an ethnicist. But he believed that some of his kinsmen must have forced themselves on him. Of Ironsi, Gowon observed:

... there were complaints that only the Ibos came to advise Ironsi. Certainly, it is true that they probably forced themselves on him. From that point of view, you may say that he was strongly influenced by that group and probably the advice they gave him and he accepted made him do a number of things that really caused some problems for his regime later. But I think it will be unfair to accuse him of ethnicity. I do not think I had ever known him to be ethnic. . . . You see, . . . the way we were brought up in the army . . . we did not think we were from this tribe or that tribe . . . You were probably much closer sometimes to people with whom you had been to the same school but sometimes, in fact, you were closer to some people with whom you had been at Sandhurst or Mons. You might try to look after the interests of people from your area but it was not done as a deliberate policy. I think we took ourselves as Nigerian Officers and gentlemen of the Nigerian Army.<sup>30</sup>

It was not unusual in the Nigerian political setting for leaders to be swamped by a number of unsolicited advisers from their ethnic group, but Ironsi should have been more sensitive in some of his appointments. Removing T.O.S. Elias and appointing Onyiuke (his friend) as Attorney General may be defended as an attempt to clear out the remains of the Balewa Cabinet. But appointing Nwokedi (another Ibo) as the 'Sole Commissioner' to report on feasibility of unification of Civil Services of the Federation is not defensible. Nor was the appointment of Dr P. Okigbo as Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance and Economic Adviser quite defensible. It was not surprising that Okigbo's second role as Economic Adviser clashed with Mr Ayida's role as Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Economic Planning. Another appointment of his was also controversial. His attempt to appoint Professor J.C. Edozien (of the University of Ibadan) as Vice-Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria met with resistance from Lt-Col Hassan Katsina who favoured the appointment of Professor Ishaya Audu.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, his reliance on some academics (such as Professor J.C. Edozien and Dr Eke) mainly from Universities of Ibadan, Lagos and Nsukka did raise some problems of credibility for him. In addition, Ironsi carried out promotion exercises in April, 1966, despite the one year moratorium

on promotions. Of the twenty-one officers promoted from Majors to Lieutenant Colonels, eighteen were Ibo speaking. The announcements after the May riots in the North that Decree No.34 was, 'Designed to meet the demands of the Military Government under a unified command and to enable it to carry out its day-to-day administration,' came too late.<sup>32</sup> This was not emphasized in the broadcast, though it was mentioned. To many observers, the explanation seemed to have been an afterthought.

Moreover, if the decree 'has in no way affected the territorial divisions of the country,'<sup>33</sup> as the government statement claimed, it is not easy to see why there was such impatience displayed, while the commission was still at work. It may be speculated that if Ironsi had created states, he would have had less opposition. A publication by the succeeding Military Government contended that 'one of the major factors which contributed to the collapse of the Ironsi government was the fact that this basic issue of the creation of states was ignored by him on the advice of his Ibo advisers.'<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps if Ironsi had tried to get out of his delusion that he could play apolitical politics, he could have effectively handled some issues. For Decree No.34 united Northerners more so than they had been prior to it. The unification of the Civil Services threatened the minority groups in the North who were more educationally advanced than the 'Far Northerners' and who dominated the Civil Service there. The creation of a Middle Belt State (together with other states) might have diluted the support of minority groups for the maintenance of a united North, as Gowon's creation of states in the Eastern Region neutralized enthusiasm for Ojukwu's secession. With Decree No.34, the minorities and the Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri teamed up to protect what they regarded as their common interests from a common source of threat: the South, particularly the Ibos.

It can be argued that the creation of states would have had some appeal to it, given Ironsi's predicament. It would not only have ended or at least reduced the sectionalism which strained his capabilities, it would have achieved a greater degree of centralization by virtue of the smaller sizes of the new states without creating much hostility to it. Moreover, there was support for the creation of states out of the four regions, and Nigeria's political history had witnessed many such demands. The Isaac Boro rebellion in the Eastern Region's Delta area during the Ironsi regime was a reaction to many years of fruitless effort to convince the government to create more states.<sup>35</sup>

Ironsi's tragedy is to be seen mainly in his vacillation. He had missed the opportunity that he had to effect changes in January 1966. By May he had appreciably lost credibility and suspicions had once again heightened. His sense of timing was faulty. Political engineering demands the ability to know the environment well, to

feel the political temperature of the system, and to know the limits to which decisions can be taken without threatening the basic consensual values which bind the society together.

By June there had emerged great discontent within the army. Northern officers were angry that nothing had happened to the 'mutineers' of January 1966, who were still receiving their pay in jail.<sup>36</sup> Col Nwawo's committee which was to try them found that trial dates kept being postponed until events later overtook its usefulness. Many Northern soldiers and civilians were really incensed by the fact that no honour had been done to their dead colleagues. They did not even receive ceremonial burial befitting military men of honour. A Northern publication even alleged that Ironsi refused to allow the Military Governor of Northern Nigeria permission to attend the Prime Minister's funeral in Bauchi.<sup>37</sup> Sardauna's body was alleged to have been allowed to 'lie exposed and its photograph taken,' and officials in Kaduna were denied 'vehicles to take his (Sardauna's) family back to Sokoto.'<sup>38</sup>

In addition, Northern civilians and politicians taunted and ridiculed their soldiers for allowing the Ibos to get away with the killing of their colleagues.<sup>39</sup> The arrogance and tactlessness displayed by Ibos resident in the North did not help Ironsi. These Ibos taunted Northerners in the market places and at other public places.<sup>40</sup>

Rumours were also rife about the 'finish up' operations pending. Many Northern soldiers felt that there was going to be another Ibo coup to complete the January exercise - to finish up the remaining Northern officers.<sup>41</sup> The situation had got so sour at the barracks that even Gowon (as Chief of Army Staff) confessed that:

the relationship between the Southern and the Northern officers had become very, very sour. From January it became a monumental task for one to get things under control because I never thought of surviving until right into July . . . At this time, of course, there was lots of underground work and we were getting intelligence reports of rumours of coup.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, there was the rumour that Ironsi was planning on rotation of governors and that Ojukwu was to be posted to the Northern Region to keep the situation calm.<sup>43</sup>

In summary, by June 1966, there had emerged discontent in the army; the North had become alert and suspicious of any move by Lagos; the South, particularly Ibos, were displeased with Ironsi's halting pace of change; and the Federal Civil Service was becoming restless and dissatisfied. Most important, however, was the fact that once the military had intervened in January, it was no longer able to remain relatively impervious to ethnic conflicts from within the larger

society. It ceased to be a united institution, and in July it turned against itself in the second military coup as soldiers found that senior officers could be killed without disciplinary measures.

If the civilian regime emphasized centrifugal forces in the Nigerian political system, the first military regime under Ironsi went too far in stressing centripetal forces in the political association of the various Nigerian people. It threatened the basic values and security of many Nigerians who saw the safeguards embedded in the Federal system removed without adequate political arrangements to protect their interests. Nigeria then saw another form of elite instability as Northern soldiers struck in July 1966 in a bloody, vengeful coup.

## Notes

- 1 Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon, Head of The Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, 'National Day Message,' September 30, 1966
- 2 As Gowon described the situation: '... from January 15 until that coup of July 29, 1966, if anyone tells you that things were normal then, he is not being honest with you.' (Interview: Gowon)
- 3 There have been many interpretations of this. One version claims that politicians never handed over power to Ironsi and that he was the one who physically coerced them to hand over power to him claiming that otherwise he would not be able to restore order. There was little alternative for the politicians. Another version claimed that the whole handover exercise had been stage-managed by Nwafor Orizu (President of the Senate who was acting as President in Azikiwe's absence) and Ironsi as a legitimization mechanism for the new regime. Gowon was not at the negotiations. Kurubo seemed to have been very prominent in this period around decision-making circles. But when Ironsi told Gowon about the handover, Gowon remembered saying: 'If this is the case then the problem is solved. If they ask you to take charge, take control; you are my G.O.C. so you have my double loyalty' (Interview: Gowon)
- 4 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree (1966, No. 1)' in the *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1966 pp.A3-A11, January 17, 1966)
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. A3
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Members of the Supreme Military Council*
  - (a) The Head of the Federal Military Government (President of the Council);
  - (b) Head of the Nigerian Army (Gowon); (c) Head of the Nigerian Air Force (Kurubo); (d) Head of the Navy (Wey); (e) the Chief of Staff, Armed Forces (Ogundipe); (f) and as from March 1966, the Military Governors of East (Ojukwu), West (Fajuyi) North (Katsina), and Midwest (Ejoor); (g) the Attorney General of the Federation by Decree No.20, 1966, April 1, Section 4, was allowed to 'attend the meetings of the Supreme Military Council and of the Federal Executive Council in an advisory capacity,' *Laws of Nigeria, op. cit.*, 1966, p.A99 Dudley claims that the Supreme Military Council rather 'than being a deliberative decision-making body . . . was in fact, little more than a ratificatory organ.' Dudley, 1973 *op. cit.* p. 128

*Members of the Federal Executive Council*

(a) The Head of the Federal Military Government (Chairman); the Heads of (b) Nigerian Army, (c) Nigerian Navy, (d) Nigerian Air Force; (e) the Chief Staff, Armed Forces (f) the Attorney General of the Federation and (h) the Inspector General of Police and the Deputy Inspector General of Police. Of the Federal Executive Council, Dudley observed, 'Contrary to what might have been expected, they (the Federal Executive Council) provided no guide or leadership to the regions, and in embroiling themselves with the problem of administration may be said to have established a pattern which the regions were to follow' (Dudley (1973), *op. cit.*, p. 117)

- 8 Decree No 20, 1966, Schedule 2, Section 97, in *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1966, op. cit.*, p. 99
- 9 Miners claim that Ironsi was not allowed by his Ibo advisers to embark on the creation of states which would entail the splitting of the Eastern Region. N. Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956-1966* (London: Methuen, 1971, p. 211)
- 10 As a 1968 Federal Military Government publication pointed out about the coup:

Firstly, some people saw in it an attempt to end Northern domination. Secondly, some regarded it as an attempt to remove corruption in Government. Thirdly, others hoped that it would *introduce an honest and just programme of political and administrative reform to correct the structural imbalance in the Federation*. No one quarrelled with these aims.

Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Collapse of a Rebellion and Prospects for Lasting Peace* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1968, p. 3)

- 11 Literature on the Military in Politics abounds but we shall not be going into details in this area. Details are available in the following texts among others: Alfred Stepan, *The Military In Politics: Changing Patterns In Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1971); S. Finer, *The Man On Horseback* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962); Einaudi, Luigi, and Alfred Stepan, *Latin American Institutional Development: Changing Military Perspectives in Peru and Brazil* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, April 1971); Robert Price, 'A Theoretical Approach to Military Rule in New States: Reference - Group Theory and The Ghanaian Case,' *World Politics*, XXIII: 3 (April, 1981) pp. 399-430; Eric Nordling 'Soldiers in Mufti: The Impact of Military Rule Upon Economic and Social Change in the Non-Western States', in *American Political Science Review*, LXIV: 4 (December, 1970) pp. 1131-1148; Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt: 1960-67* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); and Claude Welch Jr. and Arthur K. Smith, *Military Role and Military Rule* (North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1974); Brigadier David Jemibewon, *A Combatant in Government* (Ibadan: Heineman Educational Books, Nigeria Ltd., 1978); Samuel Decalo, *Coups In Africa* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976).
- 12 Brigadier David M. Jemibewon claims that:

... only a soldier or group of soldiers who have organized and executed a coup should themselves assume responsibility for the running of the government afterwards. They alone know the reasons which impelled them to take such a drastic step and they alone know the course of action they intend to pursue after the coup and the reasons for deciding on such a course of action. Applying this axiom to the coup of January 1966 in Nigeria, the inevitability of the collapse of the Ironsi regime can readily be appreciated, for the Major who planned and executed the coup in the end neither assumed responsibility for the running of the government nor had a say in the appointment of Major General Ironsi to the headship of the military government that came into being through their action.

- Brigadier David Jemibewon, *A Combatant in Government* (Ibadan: Heineman, 1978), p. 14
- 13 Among politicians killed were the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa (North), Federal Minister of Finance, Chief Festus Okotie Eboh (Midwest); the Premier of Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello (North), the Premier of Western Region, Mr Samuel Akintola (in political alliance with the NPC). The Military Officers were Brigadier Zachariya Maimalari (North); Lt-Col Yakubu Pam (North); Brigadier Adamulegun (West); Col Shodemde (West); Lt-Col Abogo Largema (North); Col Kur Mohammed (North) and Lt-Col Unegebe (Ibo speaking Midwesterner).
- 14 Dudley, *op. cit.*, Table 6, p. 105
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 129
- 16 Gowon had advised Ironsi to bring the mutineers to trial. He recalled in my interview with him: 'I had recommended to General Ironsi a number of times that these officers should be punished for the purposes of discipline in the army. The Ironsi regime would have survived if the officers had been punished. I kept advising Ironsi that something should be done.'
- 17 Address by H.E. Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, Head of the Federal Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, at the Inaugural Meeting of the 'Constitutional Review Study Group' in Lagos, 24th March 1966. Also refer to Dudley's discussion of this topic, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-125. On the humorous side, no leader who has appointed F.R.A. Williams to Chair a Constitutional Review Committee, has lived to receive the report. This is true for Ironsi and Murtala Mohammed - an uncanny coincidence.
- 18 Mr Nwokedi was made a 'Sole Commissioner' in an exercise in which Ironsi would have been wiser to have appointed regional representatives as members, especially since regional services were involved in the unification exercise. The provision that Mr Nwokedi (an Ibo and reputedly very close to Ironsi) should sit with two regional representatives in a region he visited was not enough. The representatives had no input in the report write up (because they were not members of the commission) and were reported not to have been sent copies of the report sent to Ironsi.
- 19 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Constitution (Suspension and Modification) (No. 5)' Decree No. 34, 1966, in *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, op. cit.*, p. A153
- 20 The Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Broadcast to the Nation* by H.E. Major-General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, Head of the National Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, May 24, 1966 (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1966) p. 3
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 4
- 22 Decree No. 34, 1966, *Ibid.*, p. A155 Many Northerners believed that this provision was aimed at dismantling the 'Northernization Policy' of the late Sir Ahmadu Bello.
- 23 Major Nzeogwu, in his interview with Ejindu, *Africa and The World*, May 1967 revealed a number of things.

Ejindu. All right. A lot has been talked and written about the January coup. But how tribalistic was it really in conception and execution?

Nzeogwu. In the North, no. In the South, yes. We were five in number, and initially we knew clearly what we wanted to do. We had a short list of people who were either undesirable for the future progress of the country or who by their positions at the time had to be sacrificed for peace and stability. But we had a setback in the execution. Both of us in the North (himself and Major T.C. Onwuatuegwu) did our best. But the other three who were stationed in the South failed because of incompetence and misguided considerations in the eleventh hour.

Quoted in Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 140

Many Nigerians believe that Nzeogwu was not guided by ethnic bias but was let down by his colleagues in the execution plot. The argument by Madiebo, *op. cit.*, p. 16 that the killings of Northern Officers Maimalari and Pam were motivated by the personal animosity of Majors Okafor and Anuforo for them, does not explain why the other officers were killed. Nor does it explain why Ifeajuna ran off to Enugu and held discussion with Okpara well after the failure of the coup in Lagos. It does not explain why Ademoyega found Enugu a good resort nor why Mr Michael Okpara and Mr Osadebey were not killed in a coup that wanted undesirables eliminated. Were Okpara and Osadebey any more desirable or less undesirable than Ahmadu Bello and Samuel Akintola?

- 24 Republic of Nigeria, 'Press Release' No.686/1966 (Lagos). Also Document 31 'Statement issued by the Supreme Military Council on June 8, 1966' in H.M.A. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria, op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 184-185.
- 25 A Northern Nigerian Government Publication described this reply as 'most insulting and defiant.' Government of Northern Nigeria, *Nigeria: The Realities of Our Times* (Kaduna: Government Printer., 1967) p. 7
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 5. The extent of Northern fear of domination was demonstrated by another Northern publication which stated:

In a parliamentary democracy such as we have it would take control of both the Civil Service and the Political decision making body to bring about real domination. This was actually what took place when the government of the Federation was taken over by General Ironsi. Then it meant that the political control as well as the executive arm of government was well concentrated in one single group.

Northern Nigeria, *Nigeria: North's Economic Contribution* (Kaduna: Ministry of Information, 1967) p. 8 This statement was directed mainly against the Ibos, although it can be argued that it applies to the South as a whole. It would seem that if the Yorubas had political power, the various Northern groups would feel equally threatened.

- 27 Dudley, *op. cit.*, (1973) p. 123 The Western Region was favourably placed in the context of unified Civil Service. The inclusion of the executive class would not have hurt the Western Region much. But by May 1967, many groups (including Yorubas) had come to feel that the January coup was an Ibo attempt to dominate Nigeria. It seems quite plausible that the Western Region, given the legacy of Ibo-Yoruba competition opposed the unification of the Civil Service. The years 1964 and 1965 had witnessed an intense resurgence of Yoruba-Ibo competition for public offices which figured prominently in political exchanges between the NNDP government in the West and the NCNC government in the East. For more on this Ibo-Yoruba rivalry see J. P. Mackintosh, *Nigerian Government and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966)
- 28 According to Gowon:

... Decree No.34 was a culmination of all the various advice he had been given. Certainly the decision about the decree No.34 was taken between the governors and Ironsi alone. Even some of us were only informed about it at the council meeting. . . I remember personally, I did warn that we must be very careful. But we were assured that the Governors had done their homework, that they had made all necessary consultations, and that all the chiefs and people seemed to have agreed.

(Interview: Gowon May, 1979)

- 29 After the coup, he replaced the Attorney General T.O.S. Elias (a Yoruba) with Mr Gabriel Onyiuke (an Ibo and personal friend). Dr Okigbo (another Ibo) the

Ambassador to Belgium, was made the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance and Economic Adviser to the Military Government. Mr Nwokedi (Ibo) a retired Permanent Secretary of External Affairs, was made the Sole Commissioner to investigate the possibilities of unifying the Civil Services. It would seem that, without intending to, General Ironsi created the impression that he was under Ibo pressure. It was even popularly held that Lt-Col Ojukwu had more influence over him than any other Military Governor.

30 Interview, Gowon.

31 Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

32 Republic of Nigeria, 'Press Release,' No.686/1966 (Lagos).

33 Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 185. The statement went further to 'dispel any fears of domination by any section of the country.'

34 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Struggle for One Nigeria* (Lagos, 1967, p. 25). Miners, *op. cit.*, p. 211, claims that a suggestion for the creation of a Middle Belt State:

ran counter to the long-term plan of Ironsi's advisers. Their aim was to unify the country, not to create further regions with their wasteful duplication of ministries and another independent Civil Service. They may also have realized that a Middle Belt Public Service Commission would be just as discriminatory against Southerners, and particularly Ibos, as the Northern Region itself had been. So no Middle Belt State was contemplated. If one single cause had to be nominated for the overthrow of the Ironsi regime, this would seem to be a good candidate.

35 For further discussions of the advantage of creating more states at this point, see Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

36 Perhaps one of the major causes of the July coup was Ironsi's inability or refusal to deal with the mutineers. Nearly all the Northern officers interviewed talked about this with intense emotion. Brigadier Mamam Vatsa captured the feelings of the average Northern officer then: 'they are rebels. The justifications don't make any meaning because if they are out to rectify the political situation what were their justifications for killing their comrades in the Army?'

He went on:

The July 1966 coup was motivated by the actions in January 1966 whereby an illegal action was legitimized. If you do that, you expect a counter reaction. July 29, 1966 was a reaction to an inaction against an illegal action. . . . Right from the beginning, the GOC, Nigerian Army regarded these people as 'rebels.' If that was accepted, the immediate thing was to take the necessary action to get them disciplined legally. If this was not done, then the GOC was condoning indiscipline or treason. Rather than punish men from his army who were on mutiny, he was now asking the civilian government to hand over to him before he could maintain discipline in an organization of which he was in charge. . . . In the first instance, he shouldn't even have taken over the power. . . .

Radio Kaduna (formerly BCNN) interview with Brigadier Mamman Vatsa. The above is my transcription from the tape provided by courtesy of Radio Kaduna. In a similar Radio interview, Col Duba expressed views identical to Brigadier Vatsa's above.

37 Nigeria: *The Realities of Our Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

39 Gowon's impression (which has been confirmed by many Northern officers I have interviewed) is reported below:

... January coup certainly created a lot of bad blood among the officers. As I have said earlier, as officers we always considered ourselves officers and gentlemen. But after that coup there were lots of suspicions and misgivings among ourselves. ... There were certainly Northern misgivings and distrust of Southern Officers and these things certainly created ill-feelings among us.

There was a lot of taunting of young Northern Officers in the army as to what they were doing; their people had been killed without any reaction. You can never get exact names and nobody can even tell you, but I know there were lots of worries. Of course, when the Decree No 34 was promulgated, the fears of people were confirmed and reactions started growing not only within the officers corps but also within the other ranks. And it was even more serious within the other ranks because I was told that there were tauntings of the Northern other ranks by some Southern NCOs - that they (the latter) had dealt with their leaders and that it was now their turn. I think these were the sort of things that built up into a situation in which things were really getting out of hand ...

(Interview: Gowon)

40 Interview with Alhaji Aminu Kano, January 1974.

41 Interviews with Lt-Col Walbe, Col Ochefu and General Gowon confirmed the feeling Gowon remembered that, ... as Decree No 34 was promulgated and nothing happened to the January coup plotters, I think feelings started to grow against the Ironsi regime and there was the fear that there could be possible further action to annihilate remaining Northern officers in order to ensure that there was no threat from that quarter.

(Interview: Gowon)

42 Interview: Gowon.

43 Nigeria: *The Realities of Our Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 7. It was even claimed that Ironsi was going to post Ibo prefects to all provinces of Northern Nigeria and 'the Ibo conquest would be complete.'

## Chapter 7

# The Political Eclipse

In the light of dissatisfactions within the army and disquiet in the country, Ironsi planned a two pronged diffusion mechanism 1) to explain the military situation to members of the armed forces – especially the army; and 2) to explain the political situation to the Chiefs, Emirs and Obas. The duty of explaining the situation to the military fell on Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon, the Army Chief of Staff who had attained much popularity in the army from his days as Adjutant-General.<sup>1</sup> Gowon discharged his duties effectively. Although he could not eradicate mutual suspicions within the army, his country-wide tours helped to diffuse tensions and keep the barracks calm for a while – albeit an uneasy calm. At least, Gowon's tours delayed the eruption of violence in the barracks for some months.

General Ironsi took on the second task himself. In a military regime with no institutions for popular participation, traditional rulers were important channels of communication with the masses. After all, these traditional rulers had been used for the maintenance of law and order in May 1966 following the bloody communal riots in the North.<sup>2</sup> It was therefore perfectly logical for Ironsi to turn to them again for the explanation of his government policies to their various communities, given the wave of rumours after Decree No. 34, 1966. It was a curious relationship. Here one had a Weberian-type rational-legal authority trying to tap the traditional legitimacy of Emirs, Chiefs and Obas to buttress its sagging credibility.

However, from interviews conducted with some of the traditional rulers by the author, it was found that some of them felt that Ironsi had called them to Ibadan to brief them on his policies and offered no two-way communication channel for them. They could not ask questions on issues or express their opinions on issues which worried them. For them, the Ibadan conference on July 28, 1966, therefore, was the height of the military power's arrogance. Ironically, while traditional leaders commanded some modicum of respect in their communities (and this varied from one place to the other) many of them had also lost their credibility appreciably.<sup>3</sup> For Ironsi to use them, therefore, alienated some groups. Perhaps one of the greatest

problems Ironsi had was one of communication. This problem plagued him throughout his tenure of office.

In early July, he had toured some parts of Northern Nigeria in order to explain the policies of his government to some Northern Emirs, such as Emirs of Zaria and Kano.<sup>4</sup> He then returned to Lagos to prepare for his trip to Ibadan via Benin. At Ibadan, he addressed the Emirs, Obas and Chiefs from all over the federation at the former Western Regional House of Chiefs and later attended a state dinner in his honour on the evening of the 28th of July.

There was no doubt that the July coup was not planned country-wide. A vengeful coup, it was aimed at removing Ironsi and some of his suspected Ibo cohorts in the army.<sup>5</sup> In the South where the plot was hatched, there seemed to have been some problems of communication among the coup planners. The coup, no doubt, was planned for the 29th of July, 1966, and for Ibadan. Asked why they chose Ibadan, one of the coup makers told the author that 'in the State House, it could have been a bloody battle because of the troops around.'<sup>6</sup> A detachment of the Nigerian Army which was to provide security for Ironsi had left Lagos for Ibadan, through Benin, to advance under Lt Walbe. This detachment played a very active role in the coup. Thus Ironsi was to find (like many rulers have found) that security forces very often create insecurity for political leaders.

On arrival at Ibadan, the security force under the lieutenant established contact with Northern officers. In addition to Lt Walbe was Major Danjuma, a Northern officer who was always in Ironsi's entourage, and had made the necessary arrangements for changing soldiers on guard and collecting troops from Ibadan barracks to help with the coup operation. He coordinated the Ibadan operation. The police security division at Ibadan must have heard about an impending coup, for Chief Superintendent of Police J.D. Gomwalk had tried his best to get this information from Lt Walbe at Ibadan airport but failed. Thus even some Northern indigenes in the police were not trusted enough to have information about the coup.

In the evening of July 28, 1966 Lt-Col Fajuyi had a state dinner and party for General Ironsi. It was during that party that the Northern officers passed the code word 'Araba'<sup>7</sup> among themselves. Later in the night of the same day, fighting broke out at Abeokuta garrison leading to the killing of its Ibo commander and many other Ibo soldiers. Meanwhile, at Ibadan, there had been an outburst of gun-fire, apparently as a result of a mistake in the process of loading a gun. This was taken by the Northern soldiers as an operation signal while Ironsi, Fajuyi and Njoku seemed quite worried, for they called for Lt Walbe to explain the sounds heard. Lt Walbe expressed surprise and said he was going to check on this. Between 6:00 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. on 29th July, Lt Walbe and Major Danjuma were in

effective contact at the State House after the change of guards. It was then that both officers walked up to Ironsi, saluted, and brought both Ironsi and Fajuyi downstairs. They were handed over to Lt Walbe (by Major Danjuma) to take charge. Lt Walbe and his troops took the two men to an area of bush at Ibadan where they subjected Ironsi to questions about the January coup and the Northern leaders and officers who had died then. From the accounts of those who were there, Ironsi played the part of a very good soldier. Contrary to many publications suggesting that he made confessions, there seem to be no evidence of such confessions.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly there was no evidence that Fajuyi was killed because he interceded for his host or that he refused to 'abandon his guest,' as reported by some publications.<sup>9</sup> He was reported to have been very scared, and had been one of those very much suspected by Northern soldiers. He was one of those marked down for elimination.<sup>10</sup> By the time Major Akahan phoned Gowon in Lagos and received instructions to ensure that nothing happened to Ironsi, it was too late. Even Major Akahan and Major Danjuma (then at Ibadan) had lost control over their boys.

At Ikeja, the news of the Abeokuta fighting touched off an expected barracks revolt. Northern soldiers pounced on their Ibo colleagues and killed many of them. During this period it was near chaos in the army. It very well illustrated the fact that when societal cleavages enter the barracks, 'brothers' in the barracks are no more than potential enemies. Law and order had virtually broken down. All evidence shows that this coup did not involve troops in the Northern and Eastern Regions. In fact, they heard about this much later on.

Given the breakdown of discipline in the army and the kidnapping (as it was then called) of the Head of the Federal Military Government and Supreme Commander, Brigadier Ogundipe tried to call a special session of senior army officers in Lagos. When he found that even a Sergeant would not take orders from Major Mobolaji Johnson or himself, he thought his authority as next-in-command had been deflated beyond any reasonable point. He then tried to get in touch with Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon who volunteered to go to Ikeja. All available evidence shows that Gowon was not involved in the plot. As the most senior Northern officer, he was said to be under close watch by the Ibos and the junior officers felt it would be wrong to expose him unnecessarily. Secondly, most of the officers knew Gowon's position – that too much blood had already been shed – and they were not ready to have Gowon dampen their intention to retaliate in as bloody a fashion as the first coup.<sup>11</sup>

Gowon then got to Ikeja without problems and attempted to take control of things there.<sup>12</sup> It seemed, from all indications, that Gowon

did not know the extent of disorder at Ikeja barracks. He soon found that the junior officers were ready for a change and were not interested in negotiations for a return to the status quo. They were not interested in negotiations with the Supreme Military Headquarters in Lagos. The situation was more tense than Gowon had imagined. As the most senior Northern army officer, the junior officers had looked up to him and had thought his presence at Ikeja was to lead them in defiance. Thus Gowon who had arrived at Ikeja to maintain order and help restore normalcy, found himself being called on to lead a post-coup rebellion against the Supreme Headquarters. For Gowon it was a big dilemma. It took days of discussions with the young soldiers to convince them that he could not lead them in their bid for greater forms of instability.

Gowon tried to point out to them the necessity of accepting Brigadier Ogundipe's leadership - a suggestion they rebuffed. The junior officers, Murtala Mohammed, Martin Adamu and others, insisted that Gowon should take over leadership of the country as a compromise. When Gowon refused and asked one of them to take over - 'if any one of you is interested, I am prepared to support him' - they were still adamant. During that discussion it became clear that these Northern officers would accept no one else as their leader except a Northern officer. For them Gowon, as the most senior one, was their ready choice. It soon became clear to Gowon that the only alternative to greater instability was for him to accept leadership. By this time Brigadier Ogundipe had had conversations with some of the junior officers, (notable among whom was Captain Gom) who had told him clearly that they were accepting no one else as leader except Lt-Col Gowon.

For Gowon it was a very tense three-day period. He had to convince the junior officers all over the country, especially at Ibadan, Abeokuta and Lagos, to bring their other ranks under control and prevent unnecessary bloodshed. Yet there was this problem of threat of greater instability unless he accepted leadership and calmed down his fellow Northern Soldiers. But equally tough was Gowon's respect for military authority and hierarchy which had taught him not to skip the queue. How could he take over leadership of the army and country without breaking the chains of command of the army since his seniors still remained in the force? Gowon had been able to put down the first coup and call Ironsi to take command, but now he was not only being called upon to restore order but to take over command as well, and the stress of the period got to him. He found himself in a politically tight corner.

When it became clear to Brigadier Ogundipe that he could not take command and restore order, he made an exit out of the country to resurface later in the relative peace and quiet of the High Commis-

sion in London, as Nigeria's High Commissioner. Contrary to Ojukwu's advice that Ogundipe should insist on succeeding Ironsi, most of the senior military officers including Admiral Wey, found that unless the popular choice of the soldiers assumed command, there would be no peace. They told Ojukwu so.

Once Gowon accepted to assume leadership in those dark days he quickly contacted the regional governors - Lt-Col Ejoor of the Mid-West and Lt-Col Hassan Katsina of the North. Both urged him to get things under control and stop the unfortunate killing of civilians. He did not contact Ojukwu; this had been done by Ogundipe and Wey.<sup>13</sup> As Gowon himself recalled: 'One must be fair to Ojukwu. He was not prepared to accept my leadership even at that stage.'<sup>14</sup> The Assistant Inspector General of Police, Hamman Maiduguri, and the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Alhaji Kam Salem were informed and approved of his assumption of power. Mobolaji Johnson, though not a member of the SMC was full in the picture of events.

It is interesting that Ojukwu urged Brigadier Ogundipe to insist on taking command. Given the history of military intervention, one would have thought it would have been clear to Ojukwu that military hierarchy was often challenged in intramilitary coups. In coups organized by junior officers, eliminating senior officers, it is not often possible to maintain military hierarchy. Successful coup makers very often take over power themselves or only take command from officers whom they respect. To urge Ogundipe to take command in that tense situation, against the wishes of the bulk of an army that would not take orders from him, was a clarion call to suicide. Ogundipe perhaps knew the situation better, having been in Lagos during the crisis.<sup>15</sup> He was very much involved in negotiations with the junior officers.

While trying to contact his colleagues in the SMC, Gowon also tried to get in touch with various army units to bring them under control and to ensure that there was some order. But perhaps even more important than that was the demand by some junior army officers and other ranks under Major Murtala Mohammed, that Northern troops should withdraw to the North, destroy Lagos and secede. It took a long time for Gowon to bring them to his point of view. This demand became even more widespread after August 1, 1966.<sup>16</sup>

After contacting his colleagues, Gowon then asked some of his junior officers to draft his 'inaugural' speech for him. But he was dissatisfied with this draft and had to redraft the speech himself. Then the draft was sent to some Permanent Secretaries and a lawyer (now a Judge of Federal Court of Appeal) for their comments, to ensure it was okay and reflected what should be said in the circumstances prevailing then.

Perhaps some of the interpretations and mis-interpretations which followed his speech could partially be related to the fact that he had no speech writer then, and also to people's reading of the speech out of context. The address to the nation on August 1, 1966 was delayed precisely because of the redrafting of the speech by Gowon.

Before his broadcast to the nation, Gowon had addressed the troops at Ikeja. A detailed quotation of how he felt finally when he knew he was to assume office as Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, may be useful here:

Honestly, I felt as if I was under a battle. I had a feeling of death - virtually choking me. I felt my throat go dry immediately. I was cold and yet sweating. If I could then I would have run away. But two things kept me on - one, a strong belief in God who had seen me through the Congo and two, a number of questions I kept asking myself - 'Are you not a man? Are you not a soldier? 'What would people and history say of you?' Honestly, unless you are to use power to destroy others; if you are to build, you will really be afraid to take power. My first objective was to restore discipline in the army and to prevent killings. I called the soldiers, and as I stood on the rostrum, tears were in my eyes. I was angry and at the same time, moved. I told myself that if I cried, the soldiers would have had me. I took courage and addressed them. I told them that if I heard of any more killing, they should also remember that I was a soldier, and that I could and would, kill.<sup>17</sup>

For Gowon, it was a tense moment - a moment of complex demands, of strains and of decisions. Having talked to the troops, he then addressed the nation. In his address, he reviewed the events which had led to his assumption of office. He then said:

... As a result of the recent events and other previous similar ones, I have come to strongly believe that we cannot honestly and sincerely continue in this wise, as the basis for trust and confidence in our unitary system of government has been unable to stand the test of time . . . Suffice to say that putting all considerations to test, political, economic as well as social, the basis for unity is not there, or is so badly rocked not only once but several times. I therefore feel that we should review the issue of our national standing and see if we can help the country from drifting away into utter destruction. With the general consensus of opinion of all the Military Governors and other members of the Supreme Military and Executive Councils, a decree will soon be issued to lay a sound foundation of this objective.<sup>18</sup>

He announced that with the consent of the 'majority'<sup>19</sup> of members of the SMC, he was assuming the functions of the Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. In addition, he promised to make arrangements for a return to civilian rule as soon as it could be arranged and that he intended to pursue vigorously the release of political prisoners. Gowon then appealed to all military personnel to keep 'within the barracks' except when they were on emergency duties.

There have been many interpretations of this broadcast by Gowon in which the phrase 'the basis for unity is not there' has been taken in isolation and interpreted to mean that Gowon did not believe in the further existence of Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> Some others saw it as an attempt at declaring secession from which he back-stepped because of extra-military pressures.<sup>21</sup> But read properly within context, this phrase certainly referred to unity under 'our unitary form of government' which he and other SMC members were soon to review.<sup>22</sup> In an interview with *Drum* magazine in 1968, Gowon rejected the idea that his speech was initially to announce secession:

It had become very clear by the time I took over that the basis of unity in a unitary State no longer existed. I certainly believe in the unity of Nigeria. If I didn't, I would not be here today. It was very easy at the time I took over to say 'let everybody go his own way'. The atmosphere then was conducive to such an action. I don't believe in unity by domination of any kind, whether by religion, population, or size.<sup>23</sup>

Following the sequence of events, it was clear that Gowon had had pressures from secessionists within the army, but by the time he agreed to assume office, he had made up his mind to keep Nigeria together, as our quotation from his address to the troops, above, shows.<sup>24</sup>

Even after August 1, 1966, the pressures from among some junior officers for secession continued.<sup>25</sup> It was the fear that these pressures for secession might succeed that made the American Ambassador and the British High Commissioner visit Gowon in order to express the view of their governments – before and after August 1, 1966. They told Gowon that they had reliably learnt that Northern soldiers were making preparations to cause the disintegration of the country, and that they wanted Gowon to know that 'in case such a thing happened, not a penny of British aid or a dime of American aid would be given to any part of Nigeria.'<sup>26</sup> Gowon thanked them and told them that he had not made any decision to that effect yet, and that his priority was 'to get the situation under control.' But the visit of these two men helped to strengthen Gowon's belief that his

decision to keep Nigeria together was correct. It was even more strengthened when a group of Permanent Secretaries – Abdul Atta, Ayida, Philip Asiodu, Yusufu Gobir, Ebong and some other Federal Permanent Secretaries visited him.

These Permanent Secretaries had expressed their alarm at reports that Northern troops were planning on withdrawing and that there was the likelihood of the country disintegrating. These civil servants strongly advised Gowon to try his best, in spite of all the pressures, to keep Nigeria a single country. Again Gowon thanked them for their advice. As he later recalled, 'I certainly valued it (the advice) and it strengthened me to make sure that nothing of the sort happened. I promised them that we would do all in our power to keep the country intact for future generations.'<sup>27</sup> But he intimated to them about the necessity to review the 'various decrees that had been made recently to put things right and not to have a unitary system but an effective Federal system.'

The pressures of secession were later to die down.<sup>28</sup> But certainly Gowon had made up his mind, on accepting the offer, that Nigeria was to remain a single country. What he needed was support to buttress his conviction that he was on the correct path. This sort of feeling was understandable given the reality of those dark days – the days of political eclipse which few Nigerians now can remember. They were days of political interregnum, days of anxiety and feelings of insecurity, and days which saw the future of Nigeria as a country heavily eclipsed. As Commodore (later Admiral) Wey was to tell his military colleagues at Aburi (because he was on the spot in those dark days): '... if we did not have the opportunity of having Jack (Gowon) to accept, God knows we would have been all finished... I do think people can appreciate the difficulty we were in...'<sup>29</sup>

Thus from a narrow escape during the January coup, Lt-Col Gowon emerged to help abort the coup, and later emerged as Chief of Staff, Nigerian Army. Like a Shakespearian hero, uncanny coincidences had saved his life only to produce him at the appropriate moment to help save the nation's life. In a way, Gowon was an unknown figure in Nigeria. The slim, dark figure of the soft voice on the radio was strange to most Nigerians. But it was not strange to Nigerian soldiers for whom it was a soft, but firm voice of authority. Gowon had been a very popular Adjutant-General who was respected for his astute military administration and insight into army problems – an insight that helped him to contribute immensely to the emergence of the first Nigerian Army Act.<sup>30</sup>

As Chief of Army Staff, under General Ironsi, Yakubu Gowon was very popular among his troops and he had helped Ironsi a great deal in stabilizing the situation in the barracks. 'A man of paradox, Gowon hates bloodshed and is a very devout Christian with ver-

intense human feelings of empathy. He often found it difficult to deliberately hurt people's feelings. Yet, Gowon chose the army as a career. The military profession trains people to maim and to kill. That was Gowon's profession. Again, like a Shakespearian hero, he tossed to help him decide for a military career. Soon he found that Nigeria's political turbulence tossed him to the helm of affairs. He ended up as a compromise candidate in a new political drama, a creature of crisis who had leadership thrust on him at the darkest moments of Nigeria's history. He was being called to do a job most people would have shuddered to do.<sup>31</sup> Gowon at the age of 31, by accepting leadership, was daring to go where angels feared to tread.

As an effective political compromise, Gowon had a number of positives in his new political registers. He hailed from a minority group (Angas, with a population of 138,000 by 1963 census) in the former Northern Nigeria, and could not therefore be accused of attempting to represent ethnic domination of a particular group. As a Northerner, he was acceptable to the North, even if he was an 'aruna.' As a Christian, he appealed to Southern sentiments, especially among those who had seen the North as a monolithic Islamic region. He attended churches with Southerners in Lagos. All of his working-life had been in the South, which meant a keen understanding of the South and a network of friends among members of various Southern groups. In a way, he was a real Nigerian who by the uncanny coincidences of history found himself thrust with the onerous duties of stabilizing and reorganizing the army, establishing a new framework of government, preventing imminent disintegration, establishing mutual confidence among Nigerian groups, and supervising the economy. What were Gowon's initial steps?

## Notes

- 1 David Jemihewon, *op. cit.*, on pp. 21-22, wrote: 'As Adjutant-General, Lt-Col Gowon was well liked and was popular with the troops. He demonstrated admirable gifts of charm and refinement and did not fail to temper clemency with justice when occasions required. Gowon no doubt acquitted himself creditably in the post of Adjutant-General.'
- 2 The panel set up to investigate this riot had very little cooperation in the North and was soon overtaken by the events of July 1966.
- 3 Many of these chiefs had openly taken sides with some political parties which ran counter to the principles of a traditional ruler as the father of all members of the community. This eroded their credibility and legitimacy in many parts of the country. Thus antipathy to a particular incumbent had a negative (and at times lasting) effect on the institution.
- 4 There were many rumours that Ironsi could have been kidnapped on this Northern trip except for pleas by some Northern Emirs to the soldiers not to commit

such acts during the tour. Col Duba who was to provide security for Ironsi in Kano was nearly arrested on his way to Kano when he came to Zaria because it was felt that he, a Northern officer, given the tense situation should not provide security for Ironsi in Kano. He was later allowed to proceed to Kano (Interview of Col Duba, by Radio Kaduna). Similarly, the outburst of gun-fire from an armoured car at Zaria civil aviation airport before Ironsi arrived had also caused some concern - enough to warrant rigorous searching of all officers before they entered the Officer's Mess in Kaduna later during the tour. (See Jemibewon, *op. cit.*, p. 19). These incidents demonstrate the feelings of suspicion in the Nigerian setting.

5 A Northern officer who took part in the coup told the author: 'The soldiers have been hurt and had suffered in silence. I am sorry that it happened, and that people died, but all these could have been corrected . . . We did the coup because we wanted to put a stop to what Ironsi refused to correct.' (Interview).

6 Interview. Lt Walbe.

7 'Araba' means literally 'divide' or 'separate' and had been used in the communal riots in the North in May 1966. On further investigation, one found that it was used as an easy 'code' and did not, at this stage, refer to any intention to secede.

8 It was reliably learnt from an officer and a soldier on the spot that it was Ironsi's muteness amidst a barrage of questions that led to his being shot by an angry Northern soldier. See an interesting exchange between Ironsi and Major Danjuma during the arrest of General Ironsi:

General Ironsi: What do you want?

Major Danjuma: You are under arrest. You organized the killing of our brother officers in January and you have done nothing to bring the so-called dissident elements to justice because you were part and parcel of the whole thing.

General Ironsi: Who told you that? You know it is not true.

Major Danjuma: You are lying. You have been fooling us. I ran around naked, my neck trying to calm the ranks, and in February you told us that they would be tried. This is July and nothing has been done. You will answer for your actions. (Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 55)

This account claims that Major Danjuma had initially ordered that General Ironsi be taken to Bida Prison 'pending date of a full enquiry' (p. 56). Gowon confirmed that Danjuma did not know what happened to Ironsi and Fajuyi until the harm had been done and was reported to have felt very bad.

9 See Western Nigeria, *Fajuyi the Great* (Ibadan: Ministry of Information, 1967) which came out after his official burial in 1967.

10 According to Lt Walbe

As far as I am concerned it was a lie. We arrested him as we arrested Ironsi. We suspected him of being party to the January coup. You remember the Battle Group Course which was held at Abeokuta . . . Fajuyi was Commander of the Battle Group course. He ran the course. All those who took part in the January coup were those who had taken part in that course. It gave us the impression that the Battle Course was arranged for the January Coup, so he had to suffer it too. I am sorry about that but that is the nature of the life of the military man.

Whether Ironsi was party to the January coup or not is not important, but it is important for his death, that Northern soldiers, who had leverage in fire power in the July coup, thought so and reacted accordingly. It is a streak of ironic coincidence that if the January coup was planned at Abeokuta, the first shots of the July coup were also heard from Abeokuta.

11 One of the officers involved said: 'Gowon did not know anything about it, I must

- be honest with you . . . I went to his house many times but refused to mention it to him . . . He was trying to stop any further bloodshed and also being the Chief of Staff, all eyes were on him, so we tried to keep him out of it.' (Interview)
- 12 There is no evidence that Gowon was detained by the soldiers when he got to Ikeja as published in many books. See John Stremblau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977 p. 34). The Northern soldiers only gave him Lt Walbe as a bodyguard for his protection. Those were hectic days and Northern soldiers did not want anything to happen to their most senior officer.
- 13 Lt-Col Fajuyi of the West had been a victim of the July 1966 coup and Lt-Col Kurubo, the other member of the Supreme Military Council, was not available in Lagos. The Inspector General of Police, Louis Edet was said to be on his terminal leave there.
- 14 This was not the first time Ojukwu had refused to take orders from Gowon. Gowon had called Ojukwu on January 15, 1966 and recalled: 'I remember that our discussions certainly weren't friendly. It was a question of accusations. I asked why he was doing one thing or the other, why was he detaining the Emir of Kano (because this was the report we received), why was he declaring marshal law etc. and that he should take orders from me. We fell out as a result of that. He said he would not take orders from me.' (Interview: Gowon)
- 15 Even the Permanent Secretaries who were sent to negotiate with the coup makers did not report back to Ogundipe, many of them did not reach Ikeja barracks, some of them developed 'diarrhoea on their way and excused themselves. Only a few reached Ikeja and never went back to the Island. Most Permanent Secretaries kept away from their residences at Ikoyi.' (Interview: Alhaji Sule Kolo, former Federal Permanent Secretary) Mr. Allison Ayida, the then Federal Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Economic Development (later Secretary to the Federal Military Government), recalled what Brigadier Ogundipe told a group of Permanent Secretaries who had called on him on 30th July, 1966:

He explained that the group of army officers in control of Ikeja airport and the military establishments there were not ready to assume power nor accept the responsibility for running the Federal Government. He was himself not prepared to assume power without the full support of the military establishment and the lawyers, and until he was quite certain what had happened to the late Supreme Commander. The then Attorney General, G.C. Onyiuke had, before leaving Lagos, advised him that the Constitution as amended by Decree No. 1 of 1966, had no provision for him to act temporarily as the Supreme Commander. Allison Ayida, *The Nigerian Revolution, 1966-1976* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973 p. 14)

- 16 Gowon: At that time we were having this interesting development whereby the Northern troops were trying to withdraw from Lagos. The question of 'Araba' or divide started coming up strongly . . . I know that what occupied my mind at this time was how one could convince them not to go on with that. It was a much more serious issue after the first of August. It was during this time that the demand for 'Araba' and removal of troops to the North as quickly as possible (which was being strongly advocated by Col Murtala Mohammed) was gaining strength and we had to do something about it.

This was buttressed by the fact that the soldiers 'detained a BOAC VC 10 and caused the pilot to evacuate families of Northerners to the North'. The soldiers also instructed a number of Northern Civil Servants to leave for the North. Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 139

- 17 Interview: Gowon.
- 18 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Struggle for One Nigeria* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information 1967 pp. 38-39)
- 19 This was obviously a reaction to Ojukwu's objection to his assumption of office.
- 20 See, Eastern Nigeria, *January 15th: Before and After* (Enugu: Ministry of Information), F. Forsythe, *The Biafra Story* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969)
- 21 S. Stremiau *op. cit.*, p. 35
- 22 *Drum*, (Lagos) March 1968
- 23 Read a good analysis of this in Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 142
- 24 Gowon reacted to this very simply: 'what I meant there (in the broadcast) was that I was very concerned with the development of affairs in the country at the time I felt we had to review our standing under a unitary government . . . Really the whole speech should be read in a single context'. (Interview: Gowon).
- 25 Elaigwu: Were you going to announce secession?  
Gowon: Certainly not, though it seemed to be popular opinion among some of the young officers and of some of the men because of the ideas that had been put in their heads. Certainly, it seemed as though it would have been in order with some of the political groups up-country at that time. There was that possibility. But honestly, I cannot categorically say this was the case since I did not speak to those politicians. All I heard expressed was through some of the younger officers of the Nigerian Army. But in that speech, I was not going to announce secession. (Interview).
- 26 Gowon: Interview
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Gowon has an interesting story of how these pressures petered out:

I think the point was that they (the junior officers) became convinced. They were probably unaware of the implications of their demands. One needed to convince them. I kept on explaining to them the need for us to stay and make sure that things were in order. Even if we were to go, it has to be done in an orderly fashion. If we were to go and the assets and liabilities were not properly divided (and most of them were down in Lagos) it would be the North that would lose. A number of them who got the reasoning began to change their point of view. As this went on, I remember good old Murtala (one day after coming back from a visit to the North) saying 'we are not going back anymore, we are going to stay.' So I said 'I am delighted to hear that. You go and make sure you undo what you did. You told the men that they were going, you go and explain to them that they are not going anymore.' So we laughed about it and there began to be a relaxation of the demand to go back to the North. (Interview: Gowon)

Contrary to Dudley's (*op. cit.*, p. 140) claim that there were some Northern officers (including Murtala Mohammed) who 'were not quite prepared to accept' Gowon's leadership at this early stage, the evidence points to the rallying of support for Gowon, the most senior Northern officer. The only problem Gowon had with his men was the issue of secession which went hand in hand with restoring order to the military institution. Gowon did not transfer Murtala to Kaduna when he later moved the Ikeja battalion out to the North. 'He was in Lagos and was a very close aide. He was a very effective and loyal person if he wanted to be. But sometimes, if he was influenced by others, he could become really cantankerous and quite difficult. But if you know how to handle human beings, you should be able to deal with him. I knew him well and had no real problems handling him. This was what happened during those early days and soon after that.' (Interview: Gowon)

- 29 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Meeting of the Military Leaders*, held at Peduase Lodge, Aburi, Ghana, 4 and 5 January 1967 (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information), p. 13
- 30 Jemibewon, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22
- 31 *Ibid.*, Jemibewon observed that: 'No Head of State could have assumed office at a more inauspicious moment. The situation in the country generally at the time would have daunted even the most robust heart . . . frustration and despondency abounded everywhere.' (pp. 22-23)

## Chapter 8

# The Crisis of Political Engineering

Given the tense political situation, mutual suspicion among Nigerian groups and the disorganization in the military, Nigeria's 'reconciliation' system needed a cool-headed and patient leader to help nurse the country's high political temperature. In a way, Nigeria was lucky to have had a leader of Gowon's temperament and disposition at the time. A rash and impulsive leader might have created a favourable climate for political conflagration in no time. In essence, Gowon's deep human empathy, his very patient disposition as well as his ability to effect compromise qualified him to be a suitable 'reconciliation' leader in Nigeria's battered political system. As Ali Mazrui pointed out, a reconciliation leader relies 'for his effectiveness on qualities of tactical accommodation and his capacity to discover areas of compromise between otherwise antagonistic viewpoints . . . the reconciliation leader may have to perfect also in the art of reconciling the military with the civilian sectors of authority.'<sup>2</sup>

Nigeria could not have found a better 'reconciliation leader' than Gowon during this crisis period. He not only had to reconcile various factions within the army, he had to create avenues for compromise and various forms of accommodation among Nigerian groups. This required the skills of an astute politician with great powers of eloquence, as well as insight into administrative machinery. Gowon had never been a politician and never held a political position under the Ironsides administration. He was articulate (in a soft and quiet way) but did not possess the fiery mobilizational language of a politician. Nor had he ever worked as a Civil Servant to gain insight into the sprawling administrative machinery of the Civil Service. His only administrative experience was in the army where his role as Adjutant General gave him a broad view of military administration.

Administration in the barracks is not exactly the same as the administration of a country. A political novice, Gowon needed the skills of a socio-political engineer to carry out effective reorganization of the country and re-establish mutual confidence among Nigerian-

In his political naivety, the young army officer had thought that his adventure into the political arena would be a sojourn of between three to six months, after which he would hand over to civilians and withdraw to the barracks, where he felt most comfortable. He saw his functions as basically transitional – to bring troops under control and to do whatever he could to 'ensure restoration of normalcy and peace.'<sup>3</sup> He was soon to learn that every new event worsened the situation and that he was to stay on the political arena very much longer than he had anticipated.

His first steps were very decisive within the limits of compromise possible in this period. He released political prisoners as he had promised in his broadcast of August 1. Among these political prisoners were Awolowo and Enahoro whom Gowon was later to call to national duty. Meanwhile, he and the other military leaders agreed that for purposes of normalization of the situation, regional government were to send delegates to conference in Lagos. This conference made certain recommendations:

- a. that military personnel be posted to barracks in their regions of origin;
- b. for security reasons, the Supreme Commander should take charge of peace and security in Lagos, in consultation with the military governors;
- c. an enlarged meeting of the conference should meet to discuss future political associations of Nigeria;
- d. steps should be taken to amend any decree which tended towards extreme centralization;
- e. the Supreme Commander should make conditions suitable for a meeting of the Supreme Council to accelerate return of peace to the country.

In response to these recommendations, Gowon embarked on the posting of military personnel to their regions of origin, in spite of stiff opposition to this by some Northern officers in the army.<sup>4</sup> The second Battalion, Ikeja whose officers had gained prominence in the July coup was moved to Kaduna so as to relieve tension in Lagos. In its place the 1st Battalion, Enugu, was sifted and all non-Eastern soldiers in that battalion were moved to Ikeja. Similarly he moved the 4th Battalion to Kaduna. Gowon then left Enugu as a 'home' for officers of Eastern Nigerian Origin who had to go back because of the unfortunate killings in the country. As it later turned out this humane and accommodating gesture by Gowon proved to have been a mistake, for it enabled Ojukwu to consolidate the autonomy of Eastern Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> Gowon's rationale for acceding to this recommendation was 'to give Ojukwu time to be able to think properly so that he could

cooperate with us . . . to find solutions to the problems of the army and the country.<sup>6</sup> By 9th August all Ibo soldiers were back to the East while non-Eastern soldiers had left Enugu.<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, by this laudable action of compromise, Gowon had effectively reduced his area of authority to the North, the West and the Midwest. Like the January coup, the July coup had only been partially successful. The East took on greater autonomy as from then on and the corporate sense of the aggrieved (united by common experience of misery) soon developed to buttress this political autonomy.

The atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty continued, and signs of violence in public places were found in a number of areas. Sometime in August a bridge on the main highway between the West and Midwest was blown up by people strongly believed to have come from the Eastern Region.<sup>8</sup> In Lagos, Mr Edmund Agu (an Ibo lecturer, using Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu's car) effected some havoc. He had blown up part of the Federal Palace Hotel, Lagos, and had planned to plant explosives which were to be detonated while Gowon was addressing the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference at the parliament building in Lagos.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately for Edmund Agu, he got himself blown up while he was reportedly preparing explosives to blow up Carter Bridge linking Lagos Island to the mainland.<sup>11</sup> Similar attempts to blow up the Hamdala Hotel in Kaduna, the Kaduna Bridge and Lugard Hall, Kaduna, were also reported.<sup>12</sup>

## The Civilian Political Circus

It was in the context of such forms of insecurity that Gowon operated in those days. Yet he tried to implement another recommendation of the Conference of delegates of the Regions and the Federal Government. Since Gowon had thought that he would be in office for a maximum of six months, he did not try to form a military government. For him 'political decisions were to be taken by professional politicians'<sup>13</sup> who would help give him 'an idea of how the people of Nigeria would want to see government run.'<sup>14</sup> He then discussed the idea of an Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference with his Permanent Secretaries, advisers from many spheres of life - old politicians, military men and others who visited him. This gave birth to the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference which was to survey various possible forms of government for Nigeria. This body was set up in August and had its first meeting on September 12, 1966.

That the new government under Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon deprecated a unitary form of government was no secret. His maiden speech on August 1, had clearly stated that 'the basis for trust and confidence in our unitary system of government has been unable to stand the test

of time.' In fact, in his initial executive action Gowon had already implemented another one of the recommendations – that 'steps should be taken to amend any decree which tended towards extreme centralization.' This was implemented by the Constitution (Suspension and Modification) (No. 9) Decree 1966. Decree No. 59, which reinstated a 'federal' system of government to Nigeria – a return to the situation under Decree No. 1, 1966, 17th January, 1966.

Gowon's address to the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference in Lagos on September 12, 1966 made clear his position on unitarism. Given the near political chaos in which Nigeria found itself, he saw the primary duty of the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference as one of resolving the question of 'where one goes from here.' He made it clear that:

Discounting the experience of pre-independence days, the incidents of May last in Northern Nigeria following the tendencies to extreme unification during the period after January 17 points to one and only one thing, that a country as big as Nigeria and comprising such diversity of tribes and cultures cannot be administered successfully under a unitarian form of government unless such a government is to be enforced and maintained by some kind of dictatorship.<sup>15</sup>

Lt-Col Gowon provided a broad guideline of operation for the Conference. A 'complete breakup' would be 'economically and politically suicidal' and was not to be considered. Also ruled out was any consideration of a 'unitary form of government.' If a unitary form of government was out, General Gowon gave the conference other alternatives: 1) 'a federal system with a weak central government;' 2) 'a federal system with a strong central government;' 3) confederation; and 4) 'an entirely new arrangement which will be peculiar to Nigeria and which has not yet found its way into any political dictionary.'<sup>16</sup>

After the conference had resolved the issue of the appropriate form of government, they were to consider matters such as (1) the distribution of powers as between the regional governments and the central government; (2) the territorial divisions of the country; and (3) the system for selecting representatives to the legislatures.

There was no doubt that General Gowon had restricted the choice of the committee; the ruling out of secession<sup>17</sup> and a unitary form of government seemed to be a reaction against the earlier experience of centralization in Ironsi's regime.<sup>18</sup> But it was clear that General Gowon favoured a federal system with a strong centre. He was to say later in 1968: 'I believe in a federation with a strong centre, but with states having enough power to manage their own affairs.'<sup>19</sup>

His conviction that unitarism was not conducive to the Nigerian situation emanated from Nigeria's heterogeneity. He had always believed in federalism, as he pointed out himself:

Personally, I was not a unitary system of government man. I had always believed in federation of Nigeria, bearing in mind the set-up of the country – the old regional set-up, the various ethnic groups in the country. Our variety was such that you could not get the best out of people under unitary system of government. You probably could, but at the expense of one group or the other or by being dictatorial and by forcing certain issues. I did appreciate that you just could not do that in Nigeria and get away with it.<sup>20</sup>

It was important that Gowon realized the dangers of running a dictatorial government in Nigeria. His reaction is interesting in the sense that it revealed his political bias.

In a way, Gowon's belief in federalism is similar to that of Nigeria's first Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, his political hero. Gowon admired Tafawa Balewa's patience and cool-headedness. This is important in evaluating Gowon's style of government later. As he remarked with reference to federalism and his belief in compromise:

In this respect one could say that I had always admired the way Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was running the government. People might have accused him of weakness, ineffectiveness and compromise. But with the sort of country we had, unless you did that (i.e., compromised) the country could risk a possible break-up.<sup>21</sup>

Gowon's belief in the politics of compromise and tolerance endeared him to federalism as the most conducive form of government for a heterogeneous Nigeria.

However, given the tense atmosphere in the country, not all members of the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference shared his views. Nor did he insist on their sharing his bias, which he tried as much as he could to hold back in his address.

His reaction to confederalism was similar to unitarism; he 'avoided anything that touched on confederation' because 'confederation and secession are one and the same thing in the context of the Nigerian situation . . . I never accepted and will never accept a confederation.'<sup>22</sup> However, he allowed the conference to deliberate on forms of government, including confederalism. But clearly only two choices were left to the conference: 1) the two forms of federation mentioned above; and 2) possibly a new model.

At the conference,<sup>23</sup> the Northern Region in its memorandum proposed a confederal system of government. It suggested that, since

each region had 'managed to preserve some measure of order and sense of unity within its confines, each region should be constituted into an autonomous state, 'with subjects of common interest to be delegated to a Common Services Commission. Each region or state was to have the right to 'secede completely and unilaterally from the Union.'<sup>24</sup>

Like the North, the Eastern Nigerian delegation pressed for a confederation. It suggested that the right of a region to secede from the union be accepted. Thus far, the position of the Eastern Region with regard to the form of association was very similar to that of the Northern Region. For, as its spokesman, Eni Njoku, pointed out '... the sort of association we envisage is therefore one which will be very loose indeed.'<sup>25</sup> But going beyond the North's stand, he suggested that each region should have the right to issue its own currency.<sup>26</sup>

The Western delegation agreed that a federal system would be ideal for Nigeria, given its linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity. However, as Awolowo clearly pointed out, the delegation believed that 'knowing the attitude of the North, the attitude of the East,' federalism would be inappropriate at that point in time. It therefore proposed a confederation or a 'Commonwealth of Nigeria' until such a time as peace returned to Nigeria. Oluwasanmi stated that the aim of the Western delegation, was to 'devise a system which is not too loose as to scatter us but is such that it can go with us into a truly federal system.'<sup>27</sup>

But the Midwestern Nigerian delegation believed a federal system of government was practicable within the Nigerian context then. Its leader, Chief Anthony Enahoro, pointed out that Midwestern Nigeria's only mandate was for a federal system. The Midwest favoured a federal system with a strong centre within the framework of more states, but would negotiate on the issue of the states, given the crisis situation in Nigeria. Chief Enahoro rejected the idea of a confederation because 'no confederation has survived. I would like to open as I would close,' he declared;

that the Midwestern Nigerian delegation believes that the answer to Nigeria's problem lies in a federation (belief in a Federation of Nigeria) notwithstanding the situation which has emerged or which appears to be emerging at this conference in the last few days. We do not abandon that stand. We believe in a federation, and we do not think that because we cannot have a strong federation, we cannot therefore have a federation at all.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the Northern, Eastern, and Western delegation opted for a confederal system of government as an interim solution to Nigeria's

political impasse. For understandable reasons (of the losses of life by Easterners), the Eastern delegation was more rigid in its stand for a loose form of political association. It is interesting that the Midwestern delegation stood firmly on its grounds for a federal system. While the Northern, Eastern, and Western Regions could stand alone in the event of the breakup of the country, the Midwest (comprising numerous minority groups) saw only federalism as its basis for survival. It was such a fear of survival of a small political unit in a confederation which led to a change of posture by the Lagos delegation. The leaders of the Lagos State delegation, Dr T.O. Elias, explained this fear succinctly:

... we had hoped that we would come here to fashion an acceptable form of government in which it would be possible for us, Lagos, to exist as a State, as one of the States of the Federal Government. Indeed, there is nothing dearer to the hearts of the people of Lagos than that ... I had never thought ... that ... a moment would come when we would be talking of the kind of association that we are now putting forward as an alternative to the continuation of a federal Nigeria ... And so, we are associating ourselves with the proposal that if the Regions are to have the powers which we have heard suggested for them, we shall very much loathe to be left as a kind of free-for-all territory which is suitable only for a convenient centre of arrangement but which is not really what you would call a capital territory of a united country.<sup>29</sup>

This was the political atmosphere in Nigeria. Mutual fears and suspicions among groups did not permit tolerable margins of accommodation. The Nigerian State was secondary to group interests.

The issue of the creation of states featured prominently at the conference despite efforts by some delegates to give it a secondary status.<sup>30</sup> Of all the regions, only the Midwestern Region had called for the creation of states in a new federal framework with a strong centre. It was, however, willing to compromise on the state issue for a period of interim government based on the four regions. The three big regions which had opted for confederation were unlikely to ask for the creation of states. Additional states would mean smaller units which would be more dependent on the federal government, thus working against a confederal system.

The Northern delegation supported the 'principle' of the creation of states, though in practice it opposed any creation of states within the confederal framework it had proposed. The publication of the Northern position as anti-creation of states led a number of reactions from the Middle Belt area in the North. In response, the delegation

issued a press release stating that its original memorandum 'in principle' accepted the creation of more states.<sup>31</sup> From all indications there were pressures from within and outside the Northern delegation (including the military) that the delegation should support state creation.<sup>32</sup> It was therefore not surprising that on returning from the North (after consultations) the Northern delegation openly supported the creation of more states in Nigeria and a federal system with an 'effective central government.' The Northern change of stance was dramatic and interesting.

The Eastern Region maintained that the creation of states would weaken the already 'insecure' position of the Eastern Region in Nigeria – given the verdant memory of the massacres of Ibos only months before. The Eastern position was simply that since it was 'not in the interest of this country to have a strong central government,' the country could not afford to create states under 'the present crisis.' It therefore suggested that state creation 'should be the responsibility of the Eastern Regional Government.'<sup>33</sup> Of course, it was most unlikely that a region which believed the creation of more states would establish a 'strong central government' – an idea repugnant to it – would create states on its own.

The Western Region delegation accepted the principle of the creation of more states, which it stressed should be along linguistic and ethnic lines. But in the context of Nigeria then, the states issue should be shelved until Nigeria was ready to move back into a federal system. However, if the conference adopted a federal system for the country, many more states should be created, including a Lagos State. The Lagos delegation, of course, favoured the creation of more states within a federal framework. As T.O. Elias, its leader, maintained: 'We, being statisticians (people who really want a Lagos State), cannot deny the right of other areas of the country having their states.'<sup>34</sup>

The Midwestern delegation had always stood for a federation of many states, with a strong central government. Thus, by the end of the conference, all regions and Lagos accepted the need for the creation of additional states (after a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the people concerned), except the Eastern Region, which reserved its position in view of a conference to be held in that region. We have gone into this elaborate discussion of this conference to show how leading Nigerians felt about the twin issues of Nigeria's form of government and more subnational political units at the Constitutional Conference. Other broad agreements were also reached on the structure of the central government. Subsequent events prevented further deliberations and the conference adjourned with the hope of reconvening on October 24th. But the news of the massacre of Ibos in the North, especially in Kano, had created a new dimension.

Gowon was very sad. All his attempts to sort things out and return to the barracks were being thwarted every day by new events. He could not stand this latest killing which was in reaction to a broadcast over Radio Dahomey (now Benin) that Northerners had been massacred in the Eastern Region. The depth of his sadness came through in his address to conference clearly stating that:

. . . There is a damage and I am very sorry about it. I regret it and I am doing everything I can . . . The situation has been brought back to normal, but for the safety of individuals - in case there are any riotous few - the movement of the people of eastern origin back to the East is being carried out. The governor of the East had said that because of this renewed violence, he had no alternative but to ask non-Easterners in the East to go back to their homes. I think he is justified; I will tell you that.<sup>35</sup>

Gowon, in his typical way empathized with Easterners and understood Ojukwu's predicament. He moved swiftly to arrest the Kano situation in which a Northern officer (who was trying to control the excitement of the soldiers) was killed.<sup>36</sup>

As a result of these events, the Eastern delegation did not turn up for the October 24, 1966 meeting of the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference. The conference was again adjourned to November 17, with the hope that the situation would have normalized enough for the East to feel more 'secure' and to attend. On the other hand, the Eastern reaction was that unless 'Northern troops'<sup>37</sup> were withdrawn from the West, her delegation was not going to attend the conference. Other alternatives offered to Ojukwu and the Eastern delegation were all unacceptable to him.<sup>38</sup> Then Chief Awolowo added a new dimension, that he would no longer attend the conference because the presence of 'Northern troops' in the Western Region were not conducive to free expression of the views of the people of the West.<sup>39</sup>

Gowon was left with little option. He felt the reasons given by the Eastern delegation were mere excuses to render the conference inactive. After all, throughout the conference the Eastern delegation had created the impression that they had virtually no mandate from Ojukwu to negotiate beyond the package they had brought to the conference. As far as Gowon was concerned, he was 'not prepared to have a meeting without them because they were part and parcel of the country.' He felt strongly that, based on his experience thus far, if the East was not part of the deliberations whatever resolutions were passed by the Conference 'would not be binding on them.' Such a situation would only 'mean further political crisis which one was trying to avoid.' He therefore adjourned the proceedings of the

conference 'sine die' 'because of the attitude of the Eastern Region, particularly that of Ojukwu.'<sup>40</sup>

## The First Policy Statement

The political temperature in Nigeria continued to rise. In the East the pressures for secession dated as far back as June 1966, when some intellectuals at the University of Ibadan handed a proposal to that effect to Ojukwu.<sup>41</sup> With the return of many refugees to the East, pressures of various sorts increased for the amelioration of the conditions in the East and for compensation for losses incurred by Easterners in other parts of Nigeria. If Ojukwu was still unsure about the advisability of secession in July, by September he had made up his mind. In the country rumours were rife and the anxiety graph had risen steeply.

Now Gowon had to face the realities of the situation. There was no way he could withdraw to the barracks. The military still needed reorganization and restoration of mutual confidence among factions of that institution. To worsen it all, the politicians whom Gowon had hoped would take 'political decisions' had just let an opportunity slip by. Gowon had to make up his mind to form an interim government. He had to have programmes. The country could not go on drifting without a firm government. It was in this atmosphere that Gowon announced for the first time his government's programme of action. It had become clear to him that he had to stay longer in office than he had hoped.

Thus on November 30, 1966, Lt-Col Gowon made a broadcast to the nation outlining the programme of his government. Nigeria's problems 'demanded urgent solutions' and to this end, Gowon's government had 'worked out a clear and objective programme for saving Nigeria,' – a programme Gowon stressed was non-partisan and would 'not favour any particular group or groups.'<sup>42</sup> He succinctly stated the ambitions of his government:

As soldiers, my colleagues and I are ready to go back to the barracks any day. But the work of national reconstruction must be completed; public confidence in our institutions restored; and civilian leaders demonstrate to the nation that they are ready to take over and project a better image of the country than it had just before January, 1966.<sup>43</sup>

Gowon and his colleagues had finally set for themselves some tasks to complete before returning to the barracks. In addition, politicians were to turn a new leaf in order to demonstrate that they were worthy of ruling.

Gowon had a five-point programme:

- (1) 'the reorganization and long-term re-integration of the Nigerian Army;
- (2) 'the implementation of a nationally co-ordinated resettlement and rehabilitation programme for displaced persons;'
- (3) 'the preparation of the 'Second National Development Plan;'
- (4) 'The fight against corruption in public life' to be continued; and
- (5) 'The preparation of a new constitution for the country.'

Gowon's long-term plan was 'the preservation of one Nigerian Army and one country.' But since the prevailing circumstances of mutual distrust and suspicion did not permit it, the bulk of the army in each region was to be 'drawn from the indigenous people of that region.'<sup>44</sup> The federal government would provide 'national leadership' in tackling the issue of displaced persons. This was of personal concern to Gowon who was very much touched by the human affliction around him. He then went to an issue which had received little attention in Nigeria's crisis period - the economy. A Second National Development Plan indicating the next stage in Nigeria's industrial development would be given serious attention. Similarly, the attempt to rid public life of corruption would be vigorously continued and extended from the Civil Service into parastatals.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Gowon's broadcast dealt extensively with his political programme. For the first time he came out openly on his preferences. He argued that it was obvious that most Nigerians wanted to maintain a single Nigeria. In this light, he said,

I should emphasize that the idea of a temporary confederation is unworkable. In a confederation there will be no effective central authority. Each Region as a virtually sovereign state can contract out or refuse to join any common service . . . Once we adopt the so-called temporary confederation because of the current difficulties it will be hard to come together again. This is not the future to which our children are entitled and we have no moral right to commit generations of Nigerians to this disastrous course.<sup>46</sup>

Thus his anti-confederal bias and his strong belief in the unity of Nigeria were no longer cloaked, especially since the opportunity given to the Ad Hoc Committee had not been fully and fruitfully utilized.

To achieve his objective of normalization of the situation and maintenance of an indivisible Nigeria, Gowon announced a number of measures. A new constitution was to be drawn up by a 'fully

representative Constituent Assembly.<sup>47</sup> The government would set up a 'drafting committee' to prepare a draft outline for the Constituent Assembly based on instructions to be given to it by the Supreme Military Council which was soon to meet.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps most interesting were his disclosures about this proposed draft constitution. It was to reflect 'the generally expressed desire for a stable federation' in which no one group would be in a 'position to dominate others.' The new 'Federal Constitution' must thus contain 'adequate safeguards to make domination impossible.' To Gowon,

In the stable federation, no region should be large enough to be able to threaten secession or hold the rest of the federation to ransom in times of national crisis. This brings me to the major question of the creation of new states. I wish to make it clear to the nation that honestly, I personally have no vested interest in the creation of any particular state, but there is no doubt that without a definite commitment on the states question, normalcy and freedom from fear-of domination by one region or the other cannot be achieved.<sup>49</sup>

General Gowon then announced the 'principles for the creation of new states:'

- (1) no state should be in position to dominate or control the central government;
- (2) each state should form one compact geographical area;
- (3) administrative convenience, the facts of history, and wishes of the people concerned must be taken into account;
- (4) each state should be in a position to discharge effectively the functions allocated to regional governments;
- (5) it is also essential that new states should be created simultaneously.<sup>50</sup>

'All these criteria have to be applied together. No one principle should be applied to the exclusion of the others.' Given Nigeria's 'size and distribution of the Nigerian population and resources, the country could be divided into not less than eight and not more than fourteen states.' The exact number of states 'determined through the detailed application of these criteria' would be fully debated in the Constituent Assembly.

Thus, amidst Nigeria's political uncertainty and instability, for the first time a head of the Federal Government had committed himself to creating additional states in Nigeria. But Gowon did not end his broadcast without a warning. He warned that while as a 'deliberate policy to reduce tension' he had ignored baseless attacks

and allegations against his person and the Federal Government, his silence should not be mistaken for weakness. He declared; 'We have had enough bloodshed in this country. But if circumstances compel me to preserve the integrity of Nigeria by force, I shall do my duty to my country.'<sup>51</sup>

One of the amazing things about Gowon throughout the darkest days of Nigeria's crisis was his self-confidence and his belief in his capability and the capability of Nigerians to keep the country together.<sup>52</sup> He was at times ridiculed by his admirers for being overly optimistic, but Gowon trotted on - unruffled and confident. One of the greatest characteristics of leadership Gowon possesses is the ability to demonstrate capability and generate confidence for a cause, even in the most discouraging circumstances. This quality certainly surprised his closest colleagues - that such a patient, soft-spoken man could be so stubborn in his determination when he had made up his own mind about something. He made up his mind to keep Nigeria one, and that he was going to do, no matter what obstacles came along.

If Lt-Col Gowon had appealed to his junior Northern colleagues to save Nigeria, this time he extended it to the whole country. He threw a challenge to Nigerians when he said: 'I appeal to all Nigerian leaders from all walks of life to come forward and help us in saving this country from falling apart. If we fail, we will deny future generations the opportunity to do better than we have done. If we fail, the whole of Africa and the black race will not forgive us - so, help us God.'<sup>53</sup> This plea is important because he had promised to co-opt some respectable civilians into his government to help in keeping the country together.

## The Military Melodrama

As anxiety pervaded the Nigerian political system, Gowon tried his best to implement the final recommendation by the Conference of Delegates from Regional and Federal Governments, that 'the Supreme Commander should make conditions suitable for a meeting of the Supreme Military Council.' In addition to the telephone, he had kept other forms of communication with Ojukwu open and was helped a great deal by an official of the British High Commission who did shuttle trips between Enugu and Lagos to keep discussions going on. Ojukwu would not have meetings on Nigerian soil because, as he claimed, he felt insecure outside the Eastern Region. Nor would he use a Nigerian aircraft or ship. It was at this time that the possibility of using a British frigate was discussed.

Gowon was still trying to accommodate Ojukwu. He engaged in a number of actions to help endear Ojukwu to the concept of Nigeria.

He successfully resisted the pressure by the 'hawks' in the army who thought that the best strategy was a quick invasion of the East to capture Ojukwu, before he got the region ready as a military citadel. Instead, Gowon postponed the Ad Hoc conference indefinitely, following Ojukwu's refusal to allow Eastern delegates attend this conference in October and November. Empathetic to the plight of displaced people in the East, Gowon resisted pressures to stop the salaries of federal Civil Servants who had fled to that region.<sup>54</sup>

Once again, Gowon accommodated Ojukwu in order to permit a full SMC meeting to be held when he responded positively to the invitation of General Ankrah (Ghana's Head of State) to all Nigerian leaders to meet at the Peduase Lodge, Aburi, Ghana. The meeting was fixed for January 4 and 5, 1967.

If the Ad Hoc Conference provided a forum for civilians to act out their role in Nigeria's constitutional melodrama, the Aburi meeting on 4 and 5 January 1967 provided the military leaders their own opportunity to act. The very announcement that the meeting was going to be held relieved, if only temporarily, the tension under which the nation had been subjected for some months.

The Aburi meeting was largely an intra-military affair, which (because the military were at the apex of political leadership) had not only become politicized, but had taken national dimensions and caused great concern to all citizens. It was an attempt to resolve some issues of conflict which had polarized the relationships among the military rulers, with the hope that it would pave the way for future settlement of Nigeria's political problems. But did Aburi succeed in its aims, or did it accentuate the conflicts between the Federal Government and the Eastern Regional Government? It is essential to look briefly at the decisions taken there.

At Aburi, the military leaders, 1) agreed to renounce the use of force as a means of settling Nigeria's crisis; 2) reaffirmed their belief in 'discussions and negotiations' as the only peaceful way of resolving the country's crisis, and 3) agreed to exchange information on quantities of arms and ammunition of army units in each region.<sup>55</sup>

They also agreed that, 1) the army was to be governed by the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the chairman of which should also be the head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces; 2) a Military Headquarters, in which each region was to be represented, was to be set up under a Chief of Staff; 3) in each region was to be an Area Command under an Area Commander; 4) the SMC was to deal with all matters of appointment and promotions of people in executive posts in the armed forces and the police; and 5) Military Governors for the duration of the Military Government were to have control over Area Commands in their regions for purposes of internal security.

With regard to appointments in public service, all appointments into, 1) diplomatic and consular posts, 2) senior posts in the Armed Forces and the police, and 3) super-scale Federal Civil Service and Federal Corporation posts were to be made by the SMC. These and other executive and legislative decisions affecting the whole country must be determined by the SMC, and in the absence of a meeting, be referred to all the Regional Military Governors for their concurrence and comments.<sup>56</sup> In the final communique, the military leaders agreed that future meetings were to be held in Nigeria in a location to be announced later. All of them expressed regret about the bloodshed in 1966 and vowed to prevent its recurrence.

There was no doubt that Lt-Col Ojukwu stole the show from his colleagues. Overly enthusiastic about conciliating Lt-Col Ojukwu, Lt-Col Gowon and the other military leaders (on the federal side) lost much ground to Ojukwu, consciously or unconsciously. It was no wonder then that Ojukwu asked his secretary, Mr N. U. Akpan, after the conference, 'Why were those people so jubilant? . . . Do you think they have grasped the full implications of the decisions they have taken?'<sup>57</sup> They apparently did not, and it took top federal civil servants to point out that if every letter of the agreement were followed, it would mean Nigeria's disintegration.

But Ojukwu did not keep his own side of the bargain on the Aburi arrangements. The military leaders were reported to have agreed among themselves that all civilian advisers, (including Federal Permanent Secretaries) were to be kept out of the Aburi meeting. But Ojukwu, contrary to the gentlemen's agreement took with him about nine Permanent Secretaries and other senior official advisers, to the meeting.<sup>58</sup> A Federal Permanent Secretary, Mr Edwin Ogbu, who had visited Accra on official business had reported to Gowon that some Permanent Secretaries and advisers from the Eastern Region had arrived at Accra a day or two before the conference.<sup>59</sup> But Gowon refused to break his agreement with Ojukwu, in spite of advice that there was no point adhering to an agreement the terms of which the other party was not keeping. That was Gowon, straightforward and honest in his dealings. This was to be seen throughout his rule; it was a good quality in interpersonal relations which people exploited. Like a typical Shakespearian hero, his admirable qualities were, paradoxically, his basic weaknesses. We shall return to this later. Gowon was soon to find that the more he conciliated Ojukwu, the more fastidious the latter became.

As events were later to show, the Aburi resolutions were indicative of the military's ineptness in the politics of compromise and tolerance which had been typical of Nigeria's political system. Not only did Aburi expose the military's inability to resolve knotty political problems, it showed the military as politically immature as it

questioned its claim to statesmanship,<sup>60</sup> in view of their new roles. Later events justified the above evaluation of Aburi.

The Aburi resolutions were interpreted in various forms. To Ojukwu it meant extreme decentralization, which should give the Eastern Region full control over its affairs – a quasi-sovereign state sharing some essential services with other units in the 'federation.' Though Ojukwu thought he had outsmarted Gowon at Aburi, he was reportedly surprised when, on his arrival at Enugu airport, one of his advisers said, 'But you have not brought us full independence or sovereignty.'<sup>61</sup> Centrifugal pulls in the Eastern Region increased, and Ojukwu was certainly under pressure from his advisers, to pull out of the federation. In no time he accused the Federal Government of unwillingness to implement the Aburi resolutions.

On the other hand, Gowon saw the Aburi resolutions differently. In his address to the diplomatic corps on 1st March, 1967, he said:

We agreed to return to the constitutional position before January 17, 1966 . . . Thus any powers which were taken away from the regions after January 17 were restored to them. In this context we agreed that the Supreme Military Council should be given powers to deal with all matters of national importance affecting the whole country. I emphasize that it was never the intention that any military governor should have the power to veto decisions taken by the Supreme Military Council. This, as a matter of fact, is one of the major points of disagreement which has held up the draft decree on the Constitution.<sup>62</sup>

Gowon accused Lt-Col Ojukwu of having interpreted his 'gesture of unity and good faith' as meaning that 'all current senior appointments and posting be made by the Supreme Military Council.' Such a decision, Gowon explained, could only lead to 'administrative chaos.' He said that the 'thinking here was in respect to posts such as Permanent Secretaries and principal representatives abroad.' Ojukwu denied having suggested cancelling the 'appointments of existing civil servants.'<sup>63</sup>

The problems of interpretation notwithstanding, Gowon was bent on fulfilling the terms of the Aburi agreement, with minor modifications, Ojukwu had made so much political capital out of the Aburi decisions that Gowon felt that he was honour-bound to implement them. Slogans of 'On Aburi We Stand' filled the air and the pages of newspapers. In fact, Ojukwu even threatened in February 1967 that he would act unilaterally if the Aburi agreements were not implemented by March 31, 1967. Gramophone records of the proceedings of the Aburi meetings were pressed and sold freely. Similarly, the radio station in Enugu serialized tapes of such proceedings. Driven to the wall, Gowon ordered the publication of the proceedings in national dailies.<sup>64</sup>

the continuation of the Nigerian Army under a unified command. It was in consonance with this spirit that the title of the high office which I have the honour to hold was changed from the Supreme Commander to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.<sup>72</sup>

The central government of Nigeria became far weaker than the regions. The provision that decrees could only be issued with the consensus of all military governors, while the military governors continued to make edicts in their regions (with a high degree of autonomy), meant greater weakness of the central government in its relationship with the regions. Though Gowon had (in his 30 November 1966 broadcast) rejected confederalism by the terms of the decree, confederalism could not have been more fully accepted.

Hence, edicts were made in the Eastern Region for the takeover of federal government corporations, such as the airways, railways, shipping, ports, telecommunications, electricity, and coal corporations. As Gowon had occasion to complain, 'There is no doubt that these so-called edicts are contrary to the laws and constitution of Nigeria. Consequently, they have no validity.'<sup>73</sup>

But whereas, to Gowon, the edicts in the East had no validity, to Ojukwu they were very valid. Ojukwu had rejected Decree No. 8. The centrifugal pull had gone, to the extent that federal authority was no longer binding on the Eastern Region, in practical terms. If the decree was politically expedient for short-term purposes, it was politically myopic for long-term purposes. If only Ojukwu had accepted the decree and made political capital out of it, Nigeria would have been (at the very best) by now a *de facto* confederal country, short of secession. With the benefit of hindsight, Nigeria was probably lucky that Ojukwu rejected the decree despite its embedded advantages for him.<sup>74</sup>

It is not clear why Ojukwu rejected this decree. His chief secretary, who had been involved in the drafting of this decree and was in a position to have had first-hand knowledge of what was going on, claimed that Ojukwu (and his young Ibo lawyers who had much influence over him) had made up their minds not to accept the decree. He claimed that the Ibo lawyers who had been actively involved in the drafting of the decree at Benin returned to Enugu only to recommend its rejection by Ojukwu. Akpan's recommendation (as the chief secretary) that the draft Decree No. 8 had given the Eastern Region most of its demands and therefore should be accepted, was rejected by Ojukwu.

It would seem that having made up their minds to secede (as Akpan claimed), Ojukwu and his colleagues in the East had sent a delegation to the Benin meeting with the hope that the meeting would fail - that the federal government would not accept the

Eastern Region's interpretation of the Aburi agreement. The federal government's willingness to compromise on many issues must have surprised the leaders in the East, and perhaps disappointed them. The rejection of the decree may be seen as an attempt to add new dimensions to the conflict between the federal government and the Eastern Region Government, which would provide the excuse for a formal declaration of secession. It may also be suggested that Ojukwu had sent his men to the Benin meeting (despite earlier complaints about how unsafe Benin was for Ibos from the East) in order to show the world that he had genuinely wanted peace and settlement, but that Gowon's intransigence had pushed the Eastern Region out of the country. Of course, world opinion was a very important variable in Ojukwu's calculus of a successful secession and, in this respect, he beat the federal government in his propaganda to rally world opinion to the side of 'Biafra'.

Perhaps one of the great difficulties with the Aburi agreement which was not made public was the agreement among the military leaders at an unrecorded private session. At this session Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon was to assume a new title of Commander-in-Chief (in place of Supreme Commander) of the Armed Forces. In exchange, Ojukwu agreed to serve under him 'in the spirit of Aburi'.<sup>75</sup> There was hardly any evidence that Ojukwu ever accepted Gowon's leadership in the spirit of this agreement, though Gowon again kept his word and changed his title accordingly. Again, Gowon's straightforward dealings with Ojukwu were hardly appreciated by the latter who saw it as a demonstration of Gowon's slowness of mind as opposed to his Oxford intelligence. That Ojukwu did not accept Gowon's leadership was borne out by subsequent events.

From January 1967, Ojukwu took a number of unilateral actions which no regional governor was expected to have taken. In January, he illegally confiscated produce belonging to the Northern Nigerian Marketing Board, one-third of the rolling stock of the Nigerian Railways, and stopped the sale of oil products from the refinery at Port Harcourt to the North.<sup>76</sup> On 30th March, 1967, Ojukwu issued a number of edicts as part of his unilateral actions in response to what he regarded as Gowon's non-implementation of the Aburi agreement (i.e., in spite of Decree No. 8, 1967).<sup>77</sup> In addition, he took over all Federal institutions in the region, including, harbours, Posts and Telegraphs Department, the Nigerian Railways, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation and the coal corporation.<sup>78</sup> By these actions the East had become virtually sovereign. Not only were erstwhile federally derived revenues to be re-directed to the Eastern Government, no appeals were to proceed to the Supreme Court from the Eastern Region. A new Appeals Court had been established under the Court of Appeal Edict.

It was the desire to be fair that was most important – that states should be created all over the country to allay fears of domination. Although the Northern delegation to the Ad Hoc Conference had supported the creation of states, the ethno-regional politics which later escalated in those tense post-conference days, had convinced the North of the value of its monolithic size.

This was Gowon's major area of difficulty. He had to diplomatically reason with Northern Emirs and Chiefs as well as politicians. Gowon's message was clear. If the North had any contribution to make to Nigeria, it should accept political change. An area in which it could demonstrate this acceptance of change and convince the world of its sincerity, was to accept to be broken up. While there were misgivings in some quarters, the message became acceptable to the North. It was a master-stroke in diplomacy by a reconciliation leader. For Gowon it helped a great deal. If he had to face problems from the Eastern Region, pressures and scepticism from the Western Region and a crisis from the Northern Region, it 'would have helped to destroy the country and helped to give Ojukwu the chance to get away without firing a shot.'<sup>85</sup>

With the issue of the creation of states decided upon and accepted in the North, Gowon then planned his strategy for taking a political initiative at the appropriate time. Because his plans leaked to Ojukwu very easily, even before decisions were taken, Gowon operated in great secrecy. A few actions by Ojukwu gave him the opportunity to launch his political initiative.

## The Gowon Coup

It had become evident by March 1967 that Ojukwu was going to lead the Eastern Region out of Nigeria. Although Ojukwu had repeatedly denied that he wanted the Eastern Region to secede,<sup>86</sup> statements such as, 'There is no power in this country or in Black Africa that can subdue us by force'<sup>87</sup> and, 'We possess the biggest army in Black Africa',<sup>88</sup> had signalled to Nigerians that secession was at close quarters. It had become clear that secession could not be avoided unless force was used.

Thus, when on May 26, 1967, the Consultative Assembly of the Chiefs and the Elders of Eastern Nigeria were summoned to Enugu, it became very clear that the latent secession of that region was going to be made manifest by a formal declaration. Since Ojukwu had not abided by the Aburi agreements, Gowon did not feel bound to respect the agreement on renunciation of the use of force in resolving Nigeria's crisis. In fact, in his address to heads of diplomatic missions in Lagos on March 1st, 1967, he had made a promise to the nation

that in case any section of the country acted unilaterally 'to the extent of destroying the constitution, we will have to take the necessary police action to contain the situation and maintain the integrity of the nation.'<sup>89</sup>

He even made this clearer in his address to diplomats on 24 April 1967 when he indicated that his patience with Ojukwu had reached its highest point of elasticity.

You will agree that the country cannot continue in its present state of uncertainty . . . I want to make it abundantly clear that in the event of Lt-Col Ojukwu carrying out his threat to secede, this will be a clear signal in the first place to create a COR-State for the protection of minorities in Eastern Nigeria whom we know do not want to part from the rest of the country. This action will be backed by the use of force if need be.<sup>90</sup>

If, indeed, force was to be used in defence of the interests of the minorities in Eastern Nigeria, Gowon would have to declare a State of Emergency. He could not do this without the concurrence of other Military governors, in accordance with the provisions of Decree No. 8. Yet the pressure on Gowon to take quick and decisive action before Ojukwu declared secession was mounting. On November 30, 1966, he had promised the nation that ' . . . we have had enough bloodshed in the country. But if circumstances compel me to preserve the integrity of Nigeria by force, I shall do my duty to my country'.<sup>91</sup> That duty to his country could, in the circumstances, only be performed by sidetracking the provisions of a decree to which he had been a party, as Ojukwu could not be expected to agree to the declaration of a State of Emergency. Hence, when (without the concurrence of *all* the Military governors of the regions)<sup>92</sup> Gowon declared a State of Emergency over the whole country on 27th May, 1967, he in effect staged a coup.

In the State of Emergency, Gowon assumed full powers (which had been taken away from him by Decree No. 8, 1967). He declared in his broadcast on May 27, 1967 (9:15 p.m. Nigerian time) that his duty was clear in the prevailing circumstances. 'Faced with this final choice between action to save Nigeria and acquiescence in secession and disintegration', he was proclaiming a State of Emergency throughout the country, with immediate effect.<sup>93</sup>

Lt-Col Gowon then went on to give his analysis of the political problems of the country and his political prescriptions.

The main obstacle to the future stability in this country is the present structural imbalance in the Nigerian federation. Even Decree No. 8 or Confederation or Loose Association will never

survive if any one section of the country is in a position to hold the others to ransom.

This is why the item in the political and administrative programme adopted by the Supreme Military Council last month is the creation of States as a basis for stability. This must be done first so as to remove the fear of domination. Representatives drawn from the new states will be more able to work out the future constitution for this country which can contain provisions to protect the powers of the states to the fullest extent by the Nigerian people.<sup>94</sup>

Regretting the inability within the circumstances then for 'consultations through plebiscites,' Lt-Col Gowon said, 'I am satisfied that the creation of new states as the only possible basis for stability and equality is the overwhelming desire of the vast majority of Nigerians. To ensure justice, these states are being created simultaneously.'<sup>95</sup>

Thus, after over twenty years of demands for the creation of more states in Nigeria, Gowon created states by decree, three days before the secession by the former Eastern Region. These new states were six in the North and three in the East, with the former Colony Province and Lagos forming a new state. It would seem that what Gowon did in creating states was to combine provinces. In this way, certain boundary problems were temporarily avoided.

In the North, these states were: the North-Western State (Sokoto and Niger Provinces); North-Eastern State (Bornu, Adamawa, Bauchi and Saradauna Provinces); Kano State (Kano Province); Benue-Plateau State (Benue and Plateau Provinces); West-Central (later changed to Kwara) State (Ilorin and Kabba Provinces).

In the South, the six states were: Lagos State (Colony Province and Federal Territory); Western State (Western Region, excluding Colony Province); South-Eastern State (Calabar and Ogoja Provinces) Rivers State (Ahoada, Degema, Ogoni, and Port Harcourt Divisions); and East-Central State (the former Eastern Nigeria, excluding Calabar, Ogoja, and Rivers Provinces).<sup>96</sup>

By the 'States (Creation and Transitional Provisions) Decree 1967, (1967, No. 13) States (Appointments of Military Governors) Order, 1967,' state governors were appointed to establish and/or administer the governments of the various states. Below are the states, their areas, population, and first governors.

<i>State</i>	<i>Area</i> <i>(sq mi)</i>	<i>Population</i> <i>(millions)</i> <i>(1963 census)</i>	<i>Governor</i>
<i>Northern Region:</i>			
1. Benue-Plateau	39,204	4.0	J.D. Gomwalk Chief Sup. Police

2. North-Central	27,108	3.9	Major Abba Kyari Nigerian Army
3. North-Eastern	105,025	7.8	Major Musa Usman Nigerian Air Force
4. Kwara	28,627	2.4	Major David Bamigboye Nigerian Army
5. Kano	16,630	5.8	Alhaji Audu Bako Dep. Police Comm.
6. North-Western	65,143	5.7	Mallam Usman Faruk Police Superintendent
<i>Eastern Region:</i>			
7. East-Central	11,548	7.5	*Lt-Col O. Ojukwu Nigerian Army
8. South-Eastern	10,951	3.4	Major U.J. Esuene Nigerian Air Force
9. Rivers	6,985	1.5	Lt A. Diete-Spiff Nigerian Navy
<i>Western Region and Lagos:</i>			
10. Western	29,100	9.5	***Col Robert Adebayo Nigerian Army
11. Lagos	1,381	1.4	Major Mobolaji Johnson Nigerian Army
<i>Midwestern Region:</i>			
12. Midwest	14,922	2.5	**Lt-Col D. Ejoor Nigerian Army

With regard to revenue allocation, an interim measure was established whereby the states shared among themselves the former regimes percentage in the Distributable Pool Account (DPA).<sup>97</sup>

Gowon had thus taken the political initiative. In a swift process of political engineering Gowon created a new 'Federation' with smaller and more subnational units. This move, was designed to 'correct the imbalance in the administrative structure of the country' and to 'minimize future political friction and ensure a stable federation'. He began to receive a 'flood' of messages of congratulation and support from Nigerians abroad and at home. Many people of Rivers and South-Eastern States origin were seen dancing in Lagos and enlisting *en masse* into the Federal Army.

What was 'magical' about the number 'twelve' and why was the creation of states so acceptable to most Nigerians?<sup>99</sup> The number twelve may have no magical twist to it, but Gowon (now Major-General Gowon) had intimated to the nation that he would create no less than eight and no more than fourteen states in his November, 30th

1966 broadcast. The balance between the Northern and Southern regions must have been uppermost in his mind at this time. As Ayida noted, it was clear that 'the most sensitive potential threat to the stability of the Nigerian Federation was . . . a North-South confrontation, and it was of strategic importance that the number of "Northern" parts of the country should be seen to be equal to the number of "Southern" states (this was an important consideration which could not be made explicit in the days of the "gathering storm" in early 1967).'<sup>101</sup> The five criteria, announced by Lt-Col Gowon on 30 November 1966, were the basis for the creation of states.

The linguistic principle, pressed for by Chief Awolowo and the Western delegation at the Ad Hoc Conference, was 'conspicuously set aside or subsumed in the facts of history.'<sup>101</sup> The simultaneous creation of the states seems to be in line with the suggestion from the Ad Hoc Conference. The creation of six states in the North and six states in South was aimed, it would seem, at showing the North as well as the South that there was 'justice' in the exercise. While the biggest state in the North (North-Eastern State) had a population of 7.8 million. Western and East-Central States in the South had populations of 9.5 million and 7.5 million, respectively. Generally, the states were created by putting two or more provinces together. However, the facts of history and geographical contiguity as well as viability seem to have been taken into account. The creation of Lagos State met the aspirations of the Lagos delegation to the Ad Hoc Conference for such a state. But it also had a strategic tint to it. It was 'part of the strategy of containing the former conditional secessionists in the then Western Region, who were convinced that if the Nigerian Federation disintegrated through the breakup of the Eastern Region, Lagos would automatically become part of the new "Republic of Oduduwa".'<sup>102</sup> A relatively landlocked Western State was less likely to secede from the federation, and 'besides, it was important in those days that no state be in a position to feel that it could threaten the continued existence of Nigeria as one indivisible nation'.<sup>103</sup> In a way, it was a reward to Lagos people for their support for the federal government and opposition to the secessionist bids in Western Region, which needed Lagos (as a port) for the success of such a venture.

While Gowon denied that the creation of states was a 'political manoeuvre against the so-called Ibo desire for self-determination',<sup>104</sup> there is no doubt that it was partially aimed at diluting support for secession. From available evidence, states might have been created without the threat or imminence of secession, but it can be argued that the latter affected the actual creation of states when it was done.

One of the results of the creation of states was the neutralization of support for secession. Minority groups in what was 'Biafra' enlisted

en masse in the Federal Armed Forces to fight for the liberation of their states, which they had struggled for since the 1940s. Among these was Major Isaac Adaka Boro. At the same time, the creation of states was repugnant to the Ibos, particularly because it made Port Harcourt the capital of the Rivers State, thus making the rest of Iboland a landlocked area. In addition it robbed the Ibos of the oil they had hoped would be an asset to the new Republic.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, once the war began, the civilian population in minority areas of Biafra was to help federal forces greatly in the suppression of secession. To this extent, the creation of states as a short-term strategy for coping with secession might be considered reasonably successful.

In the North, Kwara and Benue-Plateau States represented areas of pressure for a Middle Belt State. Similarly, the creation of Kano State satisfied the demands for a Kano State which had become intense by 1965. The welcome given to the creation of states showed that it went beyond a mere strategy to cope with secession. It was a reaction to a long-standing demand by minority groups.

But equally important is the personality of General Yakubu Gowon. As a Northerner his creation of states by decree was unlikely to be dubbed as an attempt by people 'from outside the North who draw up imaginary lines creating of new states in the North in order to satisfy a political ambition.'<sup>106</sup> Thus, even those Northerners who had reservations about it just went along with the decision. For those who did not like the states into which they were grouped (such as Igala, Southern Zaria and Nupe peoples), the promise of boundary adjustments by a Delimitation Committee soothed their objections, at least temporarily.

Furthermore, because Gowon himself came from a minority group (with a population of 138,224 by 1963 census),<sup>107</sup> no major ethnic group (Ibo, Yoruba or Hausa) seriously saw his action as an attempt by his ethnic group to dominate other ethnic groups. That he did not hail from any of the three major ethnic groups, it may be suggested, was an asset in the circumstances. Nor was he identified with any major group, though he came from the Northern Region. His Christian religion and his participation in Christian fellowship activities in Lagos churches also endeared him to many Christians in the South.

Perhaps most important was his sense of timing. Unlike Ironsi, he seized upon the 'fluid' situation under the military regime and expectations by many people of a panacea for Nigeria's perennial problem: the fear of domination. Like Ironsi, he broke his promise that he would consult the people on constitutional reforms (30 November 1966). But unlike Ironsi, his timing was appropriate, though it may be argued that it should have come much earlier.<sup>108</sup>

If Ironsi had taken swift advantage of the fluid situation in January of 1966 and of the general disgust with Nigerian politicians, his

actions might have received greater support than they did. One important factor also, is the fact that the creation of states, despite opposition from political leaders, at various times, had been a popular issue in Nigeria. The success of Gowon's bloodless 'coup' on 27th May 1967 may be seen in his ability to capitalize on a popular demand at the appropriate point in time in Nigeria's political history. Gowon took a political initiative that took the sting from Ojukwu's subsequent action. Ojukwu was now on the defensive; he had to react to Gowon's political move on Nigeria's chess-board.

As was expected, Ojukwu rejected the twelve-state structure. To him it was Gowon's attempt to impose his authority over the Eastern Region. A press release from the government of Eastern Nigeria described May 27, 1967 as the 'darkest date in the history of freedom and respect for human beings.' It called Gowon's actions 'dishonest, cowardly, and farcical', and stated that 'neither the so-called State of Emergency that Gowon declared nor the decree purporting to create states can apply to this region. We remain undisturbed but prepared to meet any challenge that may come from Gowon.'<sup>109</sup>

Thus when secession was formally declared on May 30, 1967 it was an anti-climax. The Federal Government had expected it. Gowon had made up his mind that violence could no longer be avoided. As he said in his broadcast, 'if it were possible for us to avoid civil war merely by drifting apart as some people claim, that easy choice may have been taken.'<sup>110</sup> It was not possible and so Gowon had to act. He dismissed Ojukwu from the Nigerian Army with 'ignominy' and relieved him of his post as the Military Governor of Eastern Region. It was more an issue of legal technicality than political reality. He promised to crush Ojukwu's rebellion.

The political atmosphere in Nigeria was very tense and for a while it looked like the Federal Government was not going to carry out any operations to effect its threat. Meanwhile, political changes continued to take place in the rest of the country. On 12 June, 1967, Gowon fulfilled his promise of 30 November, 1966 that he would appoint civilians into his government. On that date he appointed the first set of civilians to the federal executive council. They were given portfolios as commissioners (i.e. ministers) and heads of the various federal ministries, and were reminded by General Gowon that they had not been called into the F.E.C. as 'spokesmen for individual states but as elder statesmen and young reformers interested in assisting the Armed Forces to establish a new Nigeria.'<sup>111</sup>

The decision to invite civilians into his government turned out later to be a very wise one in the light of the hectic days which followed. One must give credit to the Nigerian civil services in all states and at the federal centre. They provided continuity amidst Nigeria's instability, ideas in the context of fluidity, initiative in

stalemate and confidence in the context of all-pervading despair. It is unfortunate that the Nigerian political culture has not yet cultivated the values of rewarding dedication and service. The Federal Permanent Secretaries who saw hell in those days with Gowon, included the late Abdul Atta, Ediwin Ogbu, Yusufu Gobir, Allison Ayida, Philip Asioudu, Mr Ebong, and a number of others. Gowon was lucky to have had such a group of young dedicated Nigerians at the Federal Center.<sup>112</sup> They saw in Gowon and the new military officers age-mates, schoolmates and colleagues.<sup>113</sup> For them the task of a united Nigeria had fallen to their generation and they were not going to see Gowon fail.

Gowon's accessibility, his informality and personal charm only generated reciprocal confidence from these Permanent Secretaries. Together with the military officers, they worked as a team. It is hardly remembered today what those 'dark' and unpredictable days of anxiety, or the characters who toiled day and night to keep this country together, were like. As many of these men later made their exits from the political system, true to historical pattern, they were vilified and humiliated, and nothing in the form of thanks went to them for services they had rendered. Perhaps the future of Nigeria cannot be great unless she can reward her sons and daughters (no matter what their human weakness) with thanks and courtesy. A system that turns out incumbents without remorse, after finding they have outlived their usefulness is likely to dampen the enthusiasm of many other actors on the stage. Nigeria cannot afford this.

Finally, we find so far in Gowon a reconciliation leader capable of accommodating various view points and reconciling them wherever it was possible so to do. A creature of crisis Gowon mastered the art of political compromise, a trait very compatible with his personal temperament. No doubt Gowon loved this country and sacrificed his time, energy, and (if it had arisen) his life to ensure that Nigeria remained one. The risks to his life were great when he assumed office. Yet his confidence and decisions later proved him to be a national hero. How was he going to deal with the Eastern Nigerian secession which indicated the limits of his compromise formula?

## Notes

1 David Apter, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-421

2 Ali Mazrui, *op. cit.*, p. 7

3 Gowon, interview: 'I was at the stage thinking I was going to be on the stage for three months or for six months at the most before I withdrew to the barracks. That

was my sincere conviction then. By that time, I would have been able to get the troops under control and ensured restoration of normalcy and peace.'

This was also confirmed by Mr Allison Ayida, *The Nigerian Revolution, 1966-1976 op. cit.*, p. 15 in which he recalled that the 'original aim of the military administration was . . . very limited, to hang together for some six months, until the political class could resume its traditional role.'

4 Col Garba Duba stated in a radio interview that many officers, including Murtala objected to this decision, but Gowon insisted on this to help accommodate the East. (Interview: By courtesy of Radio Kaduna, Kaduna).

5 This was illustrated by an interesting exchange:

Lt-Col Ojukwu. I like to know who will stand here and tell me he commands the Eastern Army or the army in the East.

Lt-Col Hassan: You alone.

Commodore Wey. I can tell you also here now that you are doing it illegally because when we had the first government no governor was supposed to have command of any army.

*Meeting of the Military leaders, op. cit.*

It was precisely because of the fear that Ojukwu might consolidate his base in the East that some officers had argued against the removal of troops of non-Eastern origin from Enugu. But given the situation then, Gowon's gesture was an accommodation of Ojukwu - a bid to restore mutual confidence.

6 Interview: Gowon

7 Troops in the Western Region still remained and were later to be a bone of contention.

8 Dudley, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-157.

9 Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu was Lt-Col Ojukwu's father. Some people relate his death to the shame he felt after the Edmund Agu incident after the car the latter used had been traced to him.

10 Interview: Gowon

11 Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 150

12 *Nigeria: The Realities of Our Times, op. cit.*, p. 6.

13 Allison Ayida, *loc. cit.*, p. 14-15

14 Interview: Gowon

15 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Ad Hoc Constitutional Proposals: Verbatim Report' (National Hall, Lagos, 12 Sept. 1966), p. 2 (unpublished mimeograph)

16 *Ibid.*, p. 3

17 It is interesting that Gowon had ruled out Nigeria's break-up. He had then anticipated the Eastern and Northern Regions who later expressed the desire to have the right of secession by regions written into the interim constitution.

18 The Northern Delegation, in its presentation to this conference later under the title 'The Form of Association for Nigeria' observed that:

We have had two attempts at a Unitary form of government. The first attempt proved unsatisfactory, the second proved a disaster. We have also had two attempts at a federal system. The first attempt ended in chaos and we are again presented with an opportunity to look dispassionately at our future association. (Mimeograph) p. 3

Similarly, Professor Oluwasanmi of the Western Delegation declared the stand of the West:

We think that a Unitary system of a government is a wrong constitutional medicine for the ills which beset this country. Verbatim Report, September 1966 (Mimeograph)

19 *Drum, loc. cit.*, March 1968 (no pages indicated)

20 Interview: Gowon

21 *Ibid*

22 *Drum, loc. cit.*

23 Sir Kashim Ibrahim led the Northern Delegation, the Eastern Delegation was led by Professor Em Njoku, Chief Awolowo headed the Western delegation while Chief Anthony Enahoro headed The Mid-western delegation, T.O.S. Elias led the Lagos delegation.

24 Northern Delegation, 'Form of Association for Nigeria,' *loc. cit.*, (Mimeograph)

25 'Verbatim Report', 13 September, 1966.

26 Dudley, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-154

27 'Verbatim Report,' 16 September 1966

28 'Verbatim Report,' 14 September 1966

29 *Ibid*.

30 In response to Dr Elias' suggestion that the conference set up machinery for the creation of states, Professor Oluwasanmi of the Western Region, while supporting the idea, pointed out that the 'immediate question before us' is 'how to set the country on its feet again.'

'Verbatim Report', mimeograph, 14 September 1966

31 In its opening speech, the Northern Delegation made this point clear:

As far back as 1953, when the principle of self-determination was accepted by us all and implemented in respect of Southern Cameroons, we had accepted that finance, economic viability, and the wish of the people as expressed through a free election were the basis of self-determination. These principles which were entrenched in our constitution we have always supported. What we have always objected to is the attempt by people from outside the North to draw up imaginary lines creating new states in the north in order to satisfy a political ambition. If the people in the North want more states, let them say so. This is their inalienable right. But some people from outside the North think they have the right to speak for Northerners without conceding the right of Northerners to speak for themselves. *Northern Delegation, 'Opening Speech,' Ad Hoc Constitutional conference (Unpublished), Mimeograph, National Hall, Lagos, 1966.*

It may be worth noting that in the Northern Delegation's memo entitled 'Tactical Moves' (Unpublished) Mimeograph, sections B and C, the Northern Delegation came out clearly against the creation of Lagos State because if 'the other regions opted for a federation, the political dangers of a Lagos State within such a context are numerous.'

32 For pressures from within the delegation, it was clear that Mr J.S. Tarka, His Highness A.A. Okpabi (Och'Idoma II) and Mallam Aminu Kano were insiders who supported the creation of states. Another evidence of pressure from within the delegation is the memorandum entitled 'The case for the creation of more states in Nigeria' with no name appended to it. This document which is a working paper of the delegation stressed that: 'the demand must be faced to provide means of satisfying local aspirations and ending a long-drawn political issue which is certain to continue resulting in disharmony among the people and possible violence'. In addition, pressures from outside the committee came from the military and from various ethnic groups. It was reliably learnt from an actor in this melodrama that after the publication of the Northern delegation's opposition to the creation of states, Lt-Col Murtala Mohammed met the members of the delegation at their Marina residence later in the evening. He was said to have been angry about the Northern delegation's position and to have insinuated that if the North was not ready to stay within Nigeria, the Northern soldiers should be

informed to withdraw to their region before another crisis erupted. This was interpreted by some delegates as a deprecation of the Northern delegation's ambivalent position on the creation of states. According to the source, when the Northern delegation went to see Lt-Col Gowon at his Ikeja barracks residence later, the latter was said to have confirmed the impression of the delegates earlier in the day. Lt-Col Gowon was said to have asked them: 'What do you think other Nigerians would think of us if we create more states in all other parts of Nigeria and left the North intact?' From that point, it became clear to the delegates, according to this informant, that the new military rulers in Lagos were in support of the creation of more states. The delegates must have carried this impression back to the North, and returned with a new mandate.

33 'Verbatim Report' 16 September 1966, (Mimeograph)

34 *Ibid.*

35 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Memoranda Submitted by the Delegations to the Ad Hoc Conference on Constitutional Proposals for Nigeria* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1967 p 181)

36 The arrested soldiers were in prison till after the Civil War. Some were discharged, some were punished, while others were acquitted.

37 The Nigerian Army, with a predominance of Northern soldiers, now took on a baptismal name after July 1966 as 'Northern troops'. In essence the Nigerian Army had ceased to exist.

38 Such other offers included 'Nigerian Warship outside Lagos harbour'. All were unacceptable to the East. Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 164

39 *Ibid.*, p. 164

40 Interview: Gowon

41 *Insight*, October, 1968, 22, p. 7. In an interview with Ukpabi Asika, the Administrator of the East Central State, he claimed that as far back as April/May 1966, his colleagues at the University of Ibadan,

who were Ibos began meeting regularly on Sundays. Some of their meetings resulted in a memorandum which was given to me on 26 June 1966 for comment. The memorandum argued - and the arguments have since been published - they are part of the *Crisis 1966* series - for the division of the Eastern Nigerian government, that Nigerian unity was non-existent, there was no real basis for it, and ended with the declaration, 'Long live the East, we have a new nation.'

See Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 148 for similar account.

42 Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, broadcast to the nation, 'Towards a New Nigeria' in Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Faith In Unity* (Lagos: Ministry of Information) p. 2

43 *Ibid.*, p. 3

44 *Ibid.*, p. 2. In order to achieve this aim Gowon announced that steps were being taken for recruitment of Westerners into the army within one week. He queried those who advocated the immediate withdrawal of troops from the West. 'Law and order and the entire national security arrangements in the Western Region will break down if the troops were withdrawn at once.' The events of September 1967 when Ore was invaded only justified Gowon's position and insight.

45 The first military regime had instituted some tribunals to investigate alleged corrupt practices by some members of the government before 1965. This was to be continued.

46 *Faith In Unity*, *op. cit.*, p. 4

47 Members of this Constituent Assembly were to 'Consist of at least one person from each of the existing administrative divisions in the country and the representatives

- of special interests such as trade unions, professional associations, chambers of commerce and industries, and women's organizations.' *Ibid.*, p. 4
- 48 SMC's instructions were to be based partly on the agreed recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee. If the delegates could reconvene again within Nigeria, they could contribute resolutions which would help the drafting committee.
- 49 *Faith In Unity* p. 5
- 50 *Ibid.* It is interesting that these principles were to prove important later, not only in the creation of 12 states in 1967 but also the 19 states created in 1976, and in the agitations for additional states, post 1976.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 6
- 52 His confidence came out very clearly in his terminal sentence: 'With the genuine cooperation of you all, I am confident that we shall carry out this programme successfully. We shall give this country a workable constitution and the basis for a normal political life and rapid economic progress. Long live the Federal Republic of Nigeria' (p. 6)
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 6
- 54 Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 171
- 55 *Meeting of Military Leaders, op. cit.*, Annex B, p. 67
- 56 *Ibid.*, Annex C, p. 68. The Supreme Commander was to take on the title of Commander-in-Chief. According to the minutes of this meeting: 'Any decisions affecting the whole country must be determined by the Supreme Military Council. Where a meeting was not possible, such a matter must be referred to military Governors for comment and concurrence.' But it is not clear how decisions in the SMC were to be taken - by unanimous concurrence of all its members or by concurrence of a majority of its members. (*Ibid.* p. 64)
- 57 N U Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession in Nigeria 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass, 1971, p. 53)
- 58 Ayida, *op. cit.*, p. 15
- 59 Interview: Dr Edwin Ogbu. He told the writer that he had seen a number of Ibo Permanent Secretaries arriving at Accra while he was there on official duty. He returned and informed Gowon accordingly, but Gowon insisted on keeping his word of honour. Perhaps, if Gowon had gone there with some Permanent Secretaries, it might have minimized the crisis of decision - something he was later to experience.
- 60 *Meeting of the Military Leaders, op. cit.*, p. 2. Lt-Gen Ankrah of Ghana told the Nigerian Military Leaders, 'Whatever the situation, we are soldiers and soldiers are always statesmen, not politicians.'
- 61 Akpan, *op. cit.*, p. 53
- 62 Lt-Col Gowon, in his address to heads of diplomatic missions in Lagos, 1st March, 1967. Also in *Faith In Unity, op. cit.*, p. 21
- 63 Eastern Nigeria, 'Statement Issued by the Military Governor's Office,' Enugu, 2 March 1967. Ministry of Information handout, in Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 376
- 64 This was serialized in national newspapers and also published by the Federal Government as *Meeting of the Military Leaders, 1967*.
- 65 Benin was chosen as the most neutral meeting place. There were no Northern soldiers at Benin. In fact even 90% of military officers in the Midwest were of Midwestern Ibo origin, including Lt-Col Nwawo, and Lt-Col Okwechime; and Major Okonkwo was later made the military administrator of that region (later the Republic of Benin) by Lt-Col Odumegwu Ojukwu.
- 66 Yakubu Gowon and most military officers on the federal side were sceptical of Aburi and Ojukwu's intentions. See General Danjuma's reactions in Lindsay Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 58, that he told Gowon that he doubted the outcome of the meeting would be as 'rosy' as the former believed. Similarly, Col Garba Duba opined that the essence of the Aburi talks was that 'Ojukwu was trying to buy

time . . . dragging the federation into a stalemate, having meeting after meeting with nothing coming out of the meetings while he organized to buy equipment, gained support from outside and set up his propaganda machinery.' *Radio Kaduna. Interview with Col Duba by courtesy of Radio Kaduna, Kaduna.*

67 Interview: Gowon

68 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree No. 8, 1967,' March 17th 1967 in *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria op. cit.*, pp. A57-A92

69 *Ibid*, also see 'Supplement to Official Gazette Extraordinary, No. 16, Vol. 54, 17 March, 1967, Part A' (Lagos)

70 K.C. Wheare, *Federal Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964 Edition p. 32)

71 Akpan, *op. cit.*, p. 56 On pages 56–62, Akpan has an interesting discussion of how Ojukwu came to reject this decree.

72 Lt-Col Yakubu Gowon, Address to Heads of Diplomatic Missions in Lagos, 24 April 1967 – also in *Faith In Unity, op. cit.*, p. 38

73 *Ibid*

74 Ojukwu could have used Decree No. 8 to paralyze the Federal Government. By rejecting it, he played into Gowon's hands.

75 Ayida, *op. cit.*, 15 according to Mr Ayida:

The real difficulty which was never made public at the time was that the military leaders agreed in a private session which was not recorded, at the request of the former military governor of the East, that Lt-Col. Yakubu Gowon was to become the Commander-in-Chief (in place of the title of Supreme Commander) and Lt-Col Emeka Ojukwu agreed to serve under him in the spirit.

76 Dudley, *op. cit.*, pp 176–177

77 Ojukwu disregarded the decree No. 8 as implementation of the Aburi agreement and thus went ahead with his unilateral actions.

78 Dudley *op. cit.*, pp 176–177

79 Among members of the groups were Sir Adetokumbo Ademola (Chief Justice of the Federation) Chief Awolowo and Chief Manere. Before this on 27th March, 1967, a peace delegation under Commodore Wey, including Chief Omo-Bare, and Col Adebayo, had visited Enugu to help lessen tension.

80 On May 20, 1967, Gowon responded to the request of the National Reconciliation Committee. In his reply Gowon said he accepted all their recommendations and directed that all Ministries and Departments should resume normal services with the Eastern Region with effect from May 23, 1967. He said this meant: 'a) restoration of normal postal and telecommunications services, b) disbursement of funds to services in Eastern Nigerian, c) restoration of normal shipping movements to Port-Harcourt.' He expressed the hope that Ojukwu would revoke his measures before May 25, 1967, 'these will include, among other things the repeal of the Provident Fund Edict, Revenue Collection Edict and the Public Corporations Edict, the return of aircraft of Nigerian Airways, the release of waggons and oil tankers of the Nigerian Railway Corporation and the Post and Telegraphs Departments mail vans.' *Faith In Unity, op. cit.* pp 44–45.

81 Interview: Gowon. He was very disturbed that Ojukwu did not feel for his Ibos as much as he felt. He appreciated Ojukwu's problems, but felt that Ojukwu was inhuman to play politics with human lives; 'I bent backwards to ensure that we restored sufficient trust and confidence in the Ibo people so that they could come back with us. One was absolutely sincere because I thought, in dealing with lives of thousands of your people, there was no room for cheating, falsehood or lies. You had got to be honest, to resist temptation to score a political point on the other chap and to continue doing so.'

- 82 Gowon remembers that these officers 'came back individually to dissociate themselves from that point of view.' This did not change his decision. He still ordered the troops to move out - another compromise.
- 83 They were to stop at Ilorin from where they could be ordered down southwards whenever they were needed.
- 84 At the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference papers or memos circulated by the Calabar and Ogoja communities to the session had been deliberated for a while. The Eastern delegation refused to accept any memos which were not presented by the delegation being discussed.
- 85 A crisis from the West or the North would have been too much for Gowon to manage together with centrifugal forces from the East. To avoid a reaction similar to Ironsi's Decree No. 34, Gowon had to win over the Northern leaders.
- 86 In his address to the Consultative Assembly in the East on the 20th of May, 1967, Lt-Col Ojukwu quoted part of his letter to Gowon: 'Contrary to what you have chosen to believe, it has always been my genuine desire to keep this country in existence.' Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1 p. 441
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 442
- 88 Ojukwu had told the National Reconciliation Committee at Enugu on 6 May 1977: 'If you do not know it, I am proud and my officers are proud that here in the East we possess the biggest army in Black Africa. I am no longer speaking as an underdog, I am speaking from the position of power.' Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.* p. 423
- 89 *Faith In Unity*, *op. cit.*, p. 22
- 90 *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42
- 91 *Ibid.*, p. 6
- 92 Gowon had treated the whole exercise in absolute secrecy to avoid it breaking to Ojukwu as used to be the situation. As he described it: 'When I decided to make a broadcast, it really took a day. We started the draft and ensured that no-one knew about it. Whatever draft was done, the copies (carbon copies, everything) I would take away . . . even if I was going to the toilet . . . Except for those who were with me at that time, there was no possibility that anyone would know, because previously as soon as any decision was taken . . . it had leaked. This time, I was determined that it would not leak.' Gowon had phoned Ejoor and Hassan to tell them he was going to declare a State of Emergency, etc. All SMC members in Lagos knew and Johnson of Lagos also knew. Gowon phoned Adebayo but he had gone to his home town and he left a message that Adebayo should listen to the radio. Actually, Gowon did not phone the Governor until a few hours to the broadcast. They had little choice and also little time to leak it.
- 93 *Sunday Times* (Lagos), May 28, 1967, p. 2
- 94 *Ibid.*
- 95 *Ibid.*, see the full text of the speech in *Faith In Unity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-57. He emphasized that he was taking his action because 'the struggle ahead is for the well-being of the present and future generations of Nigerians.'
- 96 Decree No. 14, 1967, 'States (Creation and Transitional Provisions) Decree, 1967' in Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, *op. cit.*, p. A106
- \*The appointment of Lt-Col Ojukwu was revoked on 1 July, 1967, *Supplement to Official Gazette Extraordinary*, No. 51, Vol. 54, 1 July, 1967 - Part B 'Revocation of the Appointment of Military Governor Lt-Col Ojukwu Order 1967.' This was after the Biafran secession. In October of 1967, Mr Ukpabi Asika was later appointed as Administrator of the East Central State. \*\*Lt-Col (later Major General) David Ejoor was replaced by Major (later Brigadier) Samuel Ogbemudia after the secessionist forces invaded the Midwest in August of 1967 and their subsequent withdrawal under pressure of federal troops - among whom Major Ogbemudia was one.
- \*\*\*Col (later Major General) Adebayo was replaced by Col (later Brigadier) Rotimi as Governor

- 97 Of the former Northern Region's 42% from the DPA, 7% went to each of the six Northern states, Eastern Region's 30% of the DPA was shared - 17.5% to the East-Central State, 7.5% South-Eastern State, and 5%, Rivers States. Of the former Western Region's share of 20%, 18% went to the Western State and 2% to the Lagos State. The Midwest had 8%. See Decree No. 13 1969, in *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, op. cit.*, pp. A49-50.
- 98 *Sunday Times*, May, 28, 1967, p. 2
- 99 For a long time there was scepticism in the South about the creation of states in the North. Many Southerners thought the exercise was a farce in the North.
- 100 Ayida, *op. cit.*, p. 6-7
- 101 *Ibid.*, p. 6
- 102 The Lagos State demand was really articulately presented during this period.
- 103 Ayida, *op. cit.*, p. 7
- 104 Major-General Gowon, Broadcast to the Nation, 26 May 1968. *Faith In Unity, op. cit.*, p. 108
- 105 The former Eastern Region accounted for 65.4% of oil output by 1967 and the Midwestern Region, 34.6%. The creation of states altered the situation. Rivers 57.1%, Midwest 34.6%, East-Central, 2.8%, Rivers/East-Central states, 5.5% - Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Struggle for One Nigeria, op. cit.*, p. 53
- 106 Northern Nigeria Delegation to the Ad Hoc Conference 'Opening Speech,' September 1966 (unpublished mimeograph)
- 107 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Nigeria Handbook, 1973* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1973 p. 132) Gowon's advantage of coming from a small minority group is similar to those of Nkrumah, Nyerere and Kaunda. In these cases, people could respond to the leader's policies without seeing him as a vehicle for ethnic chauvinism which was the problem of Azikiwe, Awolowo, Kenyatta, Kassavubu and Youlou.
- 108 Refer to Kirk-Greene, *op. cit.*, Vol 1, Doc. 102, p. 409
- 109 *Ibid.*, Document 113, pp. 450-451
- 110 *Sunday Times*, May 28, 1967, p. 2
- 111 *Faith In Unity*, p. 64, General Gowon's address to the Reconstituted Federal Executive Council.
- 112 For Example, Mr Philip Asioudu, a Midwestern Ibo, amidst the support of most of his kinsmen for Ojukwu, remained one of the staunch supporters of the federal cause. His junior brother was killed when the secessionists invaded the Midwest Region. Yet he remained faithful and assiduous as ever in the case of the Federal Government.
- 113 See J. Isawa Elaigwu, 'The Political Trio in Nigeria's Military Government. The Dynamics of Inter-Elite Relations in a Military Regime: 1967-1975' *The Nigerian Journal of Public Affairs*, Vol VI No. 2 (October 1976) pp. 97-123 for a discussion of the relationship between the military bureaucrats and civilian commissioners.

## Chapter 9

# The Blast and the Salvage.

... we are quelling a rebellion, not fighting an external enemy. . . . The responsibility for healing the nation's wounds in the future lies with us, not with any foreigner. So let us not forget why we have gone to war – to keep Nigeria one.<sup>1</sup>

After all the initial attempts at peace talks by various Nigerian groups had failed, Gowon made up his mind that the only way out of the crisis was to bring the secession in the country to an end. To do so, he had no other option but to resort to violence. Since the integrity of the nation had been threatened, Gowon had to keep his earlier promise to the nation: ' . . . if circumstances compel me to preserve the integrity of Nigeria by force, I shall do my duty to my country.' This duty could only be done by fighting the secessionist forces.

At this stage of tension (before the war started), the Federal Government made clear its conditions for any peaceful solution to the crisis which had climaxed in a secession. These conditions included:

- 1) public announcement of the withdrawal of the declaration of independence of the so-called 'Biafra Republic' and the revocation of the Independence Edict and associated edicts;
- 2) public announcement of acceptance and recognition of Federal Government authority over the then Eastern Nigeria by the former Military Governor, East (Ojukwu) or any other Eastern Officer;
- 3) public announcement of the acceptance of the twelve states in Nigeria and the immediate installation of the new Military Administrations in Rivers and South-Eastern States, subject to marginal boundary adjustments by the States Boundary Commission;
- 4) acceptance of the appointment of civilians as commissioners into the Federal Executive Council and State Executive Councils (Ojukwu has been persistently opposed to any efforts to bring civilians into the military government);

- 5) agreement to revoke the Revenue (collections) Edict and related measures; and
- 6) agreement that constitutional talks on the future of Nigeria will be held by the duly accredited and equal representatives of 12 States.<sup>2</sup>

There was no doubt that Ojukwu would not accept these conditions for preliminary talks on the Nigerian crisis. At this point Gowon was no longer ready for any more talks for he had found that he could no longer rely on Ojukwu's word of honour.

Yet Nigeria was ill-prepared for war. The months of June-July marked a period of intensive recruitment of old Native or Local Authority policemen and others into the army for short service training. But no one was drafted into the army on the Nigerian side. The masses had to be educated in civil defence and this involved massive public enlightenment. It is incredible how Nigerian leaders could have left the country militarily unprepared for obvious exigencies, given the events of 1966-67. Gowon's naivety probably accounted for this - he had always hoped that there would be a peaceful solution to the crisis and that violence would be avoided.

Now in a spate of actions an unprepared FMG found that it had to protect the integrity of the country. *GOWON* became an appropriate name for mobilization of the masses. Overnight posters were everywhere in Nigeria reading - 'Go On With One Nigeria', with Gowon's picture, with one finger raised to represent 'One Nigeria'. Another programme of federal public enlightenment included the phrase - 'To Keep Nigeria One is a Task that Must be Done.' Radio stations also used these phrases before and after news broadcasts.

It is pertinent to note that at this stage the Western Region was still largely sitting on the fence, even though Chief Awolowo had been appointed as the Vice-Chairman of the FEC. In the Mid-Western Region, there was the ambivalence of Ejoor. Although Lt-Col Ejoor supported the FMG's position, he found that he was very much in the minority among the senior army officers of the region, most of whom were Ibos. He therefore found it more convenient to play the role of a mediator, and even declared that the Mid-west would not allow itself to be made a battleground. History demonstrated the irony of this statement when the Midwest later became a real battleground, and Lt-Col (later Major-General Ejoor) had to go into hiding.

Given the frequent border clashes in Benue-Plateau and East-Central States between Federal and 'Biafran' forces, few people knew what was to happen in early July, 1967. On the 5th of July 1967, General Gowon gave orders for a 'police action' to be taken to capture Ojukwu and end the secession. This was the beginning of the 30 month Civil War. Let us turn first to the field operation of the war.

## The Field Operations

The field operations of the Civil War may be divided into four phases:

- 1) The phase of 'police action', which ended on August 11, 1967.
- 2) The Federal offensive in the Midwest to the fall of Port Harcourt, and Onitsha in mid-1968;
- 3) The period of stalemate between late 1968-early 1969; and
- 4) The Federal Government's final assault - late 1969 to January, 1970.<sup>3</sup>

As in most similar situations both sides were more optimistic about their positions than they should have been. With Gowon's order that Federal forces should 'penetrate the East-Central State and arrest Mr Ojukwu,' most Nigerians thought this 'police action' would not last long. On the other hand, the secessionists even thought they would extend their domain to the Benue and Niger Rivers which they regarded as the natural boundaries of the regions. They also expected the Midwestern and Western States to join them in a Southern Solidarity against 'feudal North'. On the Nigerian side Lt-Col (later Major General) Hassan Katsina saw the exercise as one which would only take a few hours. He probably underestimated the difficulties of fighting in someone else's terrain and the role of commitment and the resilience of a people.

The first phase of the war or 'police action' was aimed at capturing Nsukka and Enugu, and thus hopefully capture Ojukwu and consequently end the secession. In a fast move, the Federal forces captured Nsukka, Ogoja, and through a seaborne operation landed in Bonny. All these took place in the first month of the war. The capture of Bonny gave the federal forces the control of the principal oil fields which the rebels dearly needed in their bargaining with oil companies. It also gave Federal forces control of the main river channel leading to Port Harcourt.<sup>4</sup> The Bonny operation is usually noted as one of the 'most impressive operations by the Federal troops'.<sup>5</sup> In this phase, the secessionists dominated the airspace, especially with the operation of its B-26 World War II bombers and helicopters which struck deep into Nigerian cities such as Kaduna, Kano and Lagos.

In the Benue-Plateau State towns of Otukpo, Makurdi, and Gboko the B-26 was really effective in bringing the miseries of war to the people. Border towns such as Agilla were ransacked by the secessionists and were subsequently deserted.

Soon, however, Federal forces began to experience serious distractions which registered negatively for them and in favour of the secessionists. Military intelligence had intimated to General Gowon that Ojukwu's forces would invade the Midwest. He then decided to

set up a brigade under (then Col) Murtala Mohammed to be stationed at Okene, in order to save Ejoor any embarrassment. It was hoped that this force would move down through Auchu to Agbor so as to more or less cut off the invasion by secessionist forces and drive them back across the Niger.<sup>6</sup>

Before this could be done, secessionist forces invaded the Midwest on August 9, under Lt-Col Victor Banjo (and with the collaboration of Lt-Col Okwechime and Col C.D. Nwawo). This force moved very fast through Benin to Ore in the Western State.

In reaction, General Gowon, apparently incensed, declared a 'total war' on the secessionists. An announcement by the Supreme Headquarters on August 11 stated that it was clear that 'what happened in the Midwest State last Wednesday was a military coup by Ibo officers of the Nigerian Army stationed in the area.'<sup>7</sup> The Commander-in-Chief recalled efforts by various groups aimed at halting hostilities and took exception to the bombing of innocent and defenceless civilians. He, therefore, expressed his belief that it was 'necessary to arrest this destructive madness of the rebels with a minimum delay.' The statement went on: 'From now on, the forces of the Federal Military Government will reply with heavier blows for every act committed by the rebels and will pursue them in an all-out drive until the rebellion is completely stamped out.'<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately for Ojukwu, this invasion of the Midwest and incursion into the West boomeranged. It generated intense hostilities against Ibos in the Midwest. The Midwest that was not to be a battleground had effectively become one, and Ejoor who made the statement had to go into hiding. The incursion into the West reverberated to the Yoruba headquarters of Ibadan and generated distrust of Ojukwu. In no time, Awolowo, on 12 August, 1967 was making a broadcast to the Yoruba to support the Federal Government in the war.

In essence, Ojukwu's gamble in the Midwest, while militarily successful, proved to be a diplomatic blunder. It united Nigerians against secession and against Ojukwu. It drove Yorubas from their position on the fence into the mainstream of the Civil War and antagonised the non-Ibo citizens of the Midwest.

The declaration of 'total war' marked the beginning of the second phase of the war. Col Murtala Mohammed was put in charge of the second division, and was charged with three tasks:

- 1) to check the advance of secessionist forces;
- 2) to drive them out of the Midwest; and
- 3) to continue to pursue them until they could fight no more.<sup>9</sup>

This force performed superbly. On 20 September, under Col Murtala Mohammed, Federal forces entered Benin. Ojukwu's Administrator

of the Midwest, Major Albert Okonkwo, had declared, the Midwest a Republic, it was probably the most short lived Republic in history.

Enugu and Calabar soon fell in October 1968, demonstrating clearly that the Midwest adventure had overstretched the resources of the secessionists. In another big blow, General Gowon ordered the change of the Nigerian currency in January 1968. It undercut the activities of Ojukwu in the arms black market.

Ojukwu's forces, however, scored successes, at least in the defence of their territory. Contrary to advice from the Supreme Headquarters, Col Murtala attempted the capture of Onitsha three times across the Niger and lost many soldiers. He was advised not to cross over the bridge under any circumstances. It was anticipated that the secessionists would blow up the bridge which the FMG wanted to take intact in order to carry supplies to go through First Division area to capture Onitsha. This he turned down, probably because he thought it was weak to be assisted by another division. After three disastrous attempts he went through the North and later captured Onitsha. This second phase also saw the fall of Port Harcourt and Okigwe and Abakaliki in the first half of 1968. The capture of Calabar, Bonny, and Port Harcourt cut off the secessionists from the outside world via the seaports.

In addition, Ojukwu and his men got diplomatic boosters to their morale in 1968. On April 13, 1968, Tanzania recognized the 'Republic of Biafra'. This was followed by the recognition accorded Biafra by Gabon on May 8; Ivory Coast on May 15 and Zambia on May 20, 1968. Meanwhile, efforts at peace talks continued in London and Kampala. We shall return to these talks later.

It is important to note that Gowon had hoped the war would be ended by March 31, 1968.<sup>10</sup> But as he pointed out in his broadcast of March 31, 1968. 'My message about March 31 was misinterpreted by some information media. As a professional soldier, I know that a war cannot be brought to a complete stop on a predetermined date. A commander knows when a war may start but cannot tell when it will end.'

Gowon was obviously worried that the war was going on for longer than he had expected, but he was fully satisfied that the backbone of the rebellion had been broken with recent successes of federal forces and the overall military position.

Federal troops made more advances into the secessionist area before a general slackening crept in. The Third Marine Commando made a quick dash at Aba and captured it on September 4. A federal landing at Oguta Lake, fifteen miles from Uli Ihiala (the secessionist's main airfield) could not be sustained, but Federal forces captured Owerri on September 16, 1968. Okigwe fell on October 1, thus putting pressure on the southern flank of Umuahia.

The second half of 1968 witnessed greater external involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, especially in reaction to Ojukwu's allegations of 'genocide' against the Federal Government. With secessionist propaganda extracting international sympathy for her, the Vatican Relief Agency, Oxfam, Caritas International, Save the Children Fund, the French Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross and various church organizations began to put pressure on the FMG. Allegations of genocide even got the Federal Government to set up a team of observers with representatives from Canada, Sweden, Poland, United Kingdom and the OAU.

In a quick reverse of military fortunes, the secessionists made serious efforts to regain Okigwe and Onitsha, and launched an offensive on Owerri which they encircled, isolating Federal troops who had to depend on airlifts for a while. Federal forces moved forward to Uzuakoli and captured the oil refinery of the secessionists and proceeded to capture Umuahia in April, 1969.

As secessionists wearily pondered over the loss of Umuahia, their new offensive was rewarded by their recapture of Owerri, Oguta and Egbema oil fields. For a while there was a lull in the war and it seemed that though remaining 'Biafra' land area was very small, there was stalemate in the war.

In Nigeria, people were getting restless with the slow pace of the war. Field Commanders accused staff officers at the Army Headquarters of 'starving them of arms, equipment and material, thereby prolonging the war.'<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, staff officers were reported to have accused field commanders of extravagance and mismanagement of resources sent to them. Field commanders were accused of disobeying orders, and lack of ability to co-ordinate their efforts in the field. There was no doubt that the army and Supreme Headquarters were very ineffective in their co-ordination of the war. The Divisional Commanders acted independently as if they were fighting different wars, and exhibited great power and autonomy outside the confines of Lagos.

It was in this context that Gowon changed the War Commanders on May 12, 1969. With the reorganization, Col Bissalla took over command of First Division from Col Shuwa; Col Jallo relieved Col Haruna in the Second Division; and Col Obasanjo replaced Col Adekunle in the Third Marine Commando.

Of the old commanders Col Mohammed Shuwa was, in the words of General Gowon, 'one of the best commanders that we ever produced as far as the Nigerian Army is concerned. He is an exceptionally good commander, loyal, obedient; that disciplined commander really infused discipline into the soldiers and that was why the Division he was put in charge of became really the bulwark of the Nigerian Army throughout the Civil War.'<sup>14</sup> Col Shuwa was a textbook

commander who paid meticulous attention to his operations and believed in effectively controlling a captured area before moving on. While this was very useful, very often, it allowed the secessionists to regroup for either defence or counter-attack.

Col Murtala Mohammed was a courageous commander who, in fact, would lead his troops afield. His daring personal adventure across the Niger Bridge with his troops was illustrative of his dogged courage. But Murtala was not an organized commander. He paid little attention to details of organization. As an illustration, on one of the disastrous trips his troops made across the Niger, they found themselves facing serious secessionist attack, and many boats were sunk. None of his rear commanding officers could be found. His redeployment had created confusion over who the Brigade Commander was. He could not even be reached himself in this desperate situation for quite some time. But he was a commander who infused enthusiasm in his subordinates by his occasional courageous actions. However, once he had a target in mind, he was sometimes injudicial in the use of his troops so long as he captured it.

Col Adekunle was a flamboyant and courageous commander – the Nigerian equivalent of General McArthur. He was brisk and decisive, but perhaps like McArthur suffered from hubris. He basked in publicity and often embarrassed the government by his tirades at press conferences. But he was a fine commander whose last days saw his weariness with the war. He had after all, fought for a long time – from the former Midwest through Rivers, South-Eastern and East-Central State. His greatest set-back was the recapture of Owerri.

Col Haruna was also a good commander who inherited a demoralized division after the Onitsha experiences. His troops really got bogged down in its attempts to penetrate Ibo heartland.

General Gowon tried to proffer reasons for the slowness of the operations, given obvious worries in Nigeria. In fact, there were some Nigerians who believed that some commanders were delaying progress in order to enrich themselves or enjoy the perquisites of command. Outside Nigeria, many countries were worried about the hardship being caused by a prolonged war. Thus after changing his commanders, Gowon found it necessary to explain the situation to the OAU Assembly of Heads of State at Addis Ababa on September 6, 1969.

Gowon told the assembly that there were four reasons for the delay in military operations. The first reason was the international conspiracy against Nigeria in collaboration with racialists who were committed to the disintegration of Nigeria after their failure in Zaire (Congo). Second, were the activities of some humanitarian organizations and relief agencies who were helping to sustain the secessionist regime through moral and material support including the 'direct

supply of foreign exchange, arms and military equipment.' He promised, however, that this situation would not make the FMG prevent genuine relief supplies from getting to innocent civilians.

The third factor holding up the war was the 'vicious propaganda and unparalleled falsehood' dished out by the secessionist regime which made the common man in the area feel that he was fighting for survival - against genocide. The myth of genocide, Gowon stressed, had been exploded.

Finally, Gowon pointed out that 'the conduct of the war has been guided by our strong desire to quell a rebellion and not to destroy our own people.' He emphasized: 'We are not fighting a non-discriminatory war or total destruction as would have been the case in a total war against an enemy.'<sup>15</sup>

With the new commanders, Gowon hoped that a new and final push would be embarked upon to end the whole war and the international interests and pressures it was generating. On November 11, 1969, Brigadier (later Major-General) Hassan Usman Katsina (the chief of Army Staff) gave orders to the Federal forces 'to liberate what was left of the rebel-held areas.'<sup>16</sup> With these orders both the First Infantry and Third Marine Commando Divisions advanced into the remaining enclaves of Biafra. With the Nigerian Air Force controlling the airspace and bombing secessionist military targets,<sup>17</sup> the Federal forces recaptured Owerri, linked up with Aba and Umuahia and captured Uli Ihiala - the notorious airstrip for the secessionist importation of arms and equipment.<sup>18</sup>

On the 10th of January (just before Uli Ihiala fell) Ojukwu had his last meeting with his cabinet and military advisers where he informed them of his decision to leave. At 3:00 a.m. on January 11, Ojukwu flew out of Uli Ihiala saying he was going 'in search for peace.' As his broadcast later justifying his departure disclosed: 'I did this knowing that, whilst I live, Biafra lives. If I am no more, it would be only a matter of time for the concept to be swept into oblivion.'<sup>19</sup>

'General' Ojukwu left behind his second-in-command, 'Major-General' (Lt-Col in the Nigerian Army) Philip Effiong to administer Biafra. After consultations with his colleagues Philip Effiong made a broadcast to his people on January 12, 1970. In his broadcast, Philip Effiong praised the gallantry of his men and thanked them for their 'steadfastness and courage in the face of overwhelming odds and starvation.' But he expressed his strong conviction that it was time to stop the bloodshed and the suffering of innocent people. In his words:

Our people are now disillusioned, and those elements of the old government regime who have made negotiation and reconciliation impossible have voluntarily removed themselves from our

midst. I have therefore instructed an early disengagement of troops. I am dispatching emissaries to make contacts with Nigeria's field commanders in places like Onitsha, Owerri, Awka, Enugu and Calabar with a view to arranging an armistice. I urge on General Gowon in the name of humanity to order his troops to halt, while an armistice is negotiated in order to avoid much suffering, caused by the movement of population . . . A delegation of our people is . . . ready to meet representatives of the Nigerian Federal Government anywhere to negotiate a peace settlement on the basis of the OAU resolution.<sup>20</sup>

As far as Effiong was concerned, 'Any question of a government-in-exile is repudiated by our people.' Thus, in effect, Biafra surrendered and by accepting the OAU resolution, was accepting the concept of a single Nigeria in the context of twelve states.

In response, Gowon in a midnight broadcast, called it a 'great moment of victory for national unity and reconciliation . . . the end of a tragic and painful conflict.'<sup>21</sup> He praised the courage, loyalty and gallantry of his men and recalled the essence of the war:

Our objective was to crush the rebellion; to maintain the territorial integrity of our nation; to assert the ability of the black man to build a strong, progressive and prosperous modern state and to ensure respect, dignity and equality in the comity of nations for prosperity.<sup>22</sup>

Gowon accepted in good faith 'Lieutenant-Colonel Effiong's declaration accepting the OAU resolutions supporting the unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria.' He then appealed to all secessionists to 'act honourably and lay down their arms in an orderly manner.' To his field commanders, Gowon gave instructions to make immediate contingency arrangements for the mass surrender of secessionist forces. All field officers were urged to give full protection to surrendering troops. In this exercise all federal troops 'must continue to observe the letter and the spirit of the code of conduct issued at the beginning of the military operations.'<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Gowon reiterated his promise of 'a general amnesty for all those misled into the futile attempt to disintegrate the country', and called on all Nigerians to demonstrate honourable reconciliation in the context of a united Nigeria. But the advance of Federal forces continued in line with Gowon's instructions that they should advance until every inch of Biafra was physically under federal authority and secessionist soldiers were disarmed. Federal forces were not to 'open fire unless they are fired at.'<sup>24</sup> When Brigadier Obasanjo captured the secessionist radio, he then made a broadcast halting all movements by the military and announced a takeover by the police.

For all practical intents and purposes, that was the end of the fratricidal war in Nigeria. Obasanjo later arranged for Philip Effiong and other secessionists to be transported to Lagos for the formal surrender.

Thus ended Nigeria's gory war in which Gowon triumphed in keeping Nigeria together. In retrospect, Gowon has been blamed for the action of his commanders who were really behaving like 'lords' unto themselves. As the Commander-in-Chief, quite a number of Nigerians believe that, if Gowon had been more firm in his control over his commanders, the war would have ended earlier. They point to the laxity at the Headquarters, where a general, General Ekpo, was able to study law part-time and pass the exams during the war. They point to the occasional outburst of Nigeria's hotspur commander, Brigadier Adekunle, which often embarrassed the government.

In addition, many people suspected, like in all wars, that some field commanders were making fortunes by the blood of fellow men; collecting salaries and perquisites of dead soldier colleagues and military welfare facilities in collusion with contractors who supplied these. Like the case of the governors, Gowon was accused of obvious weakness in relation to his commanders. How does Gowon react to these?

For Gowon, this is how he operated:

When I appointed my commanders I gave them a free hand to run their own show. I think it was unnecessary for the man at the top to keep on pestering the life of the person he appointed . . . I allowed my commanders free hands. They were on the ground, they knew the problems on the ground. All that we wanted to know was how the operation was going and they were to keep us well informed just as it is done militarily anywhere. We would read the bigger battle map and then say, 'This is what you should do, this is what you should not do . . .' But how you run your operations was left to you. Of course, there was the code of conduct which I had given to all the troops on how to fight a battle - but humanely; how to conduct yourself and how to treat prisoners of war that were captured and how you really looked after the civilian population in the areas that had been captured . . . but the actual way of running the battle, how you placed your troops, how they advanced and so on, were left to you. We supplied you with the equipment, arms, ammunition, with the reinforcement and you get on with the job.

Of course, Gowon's attitude to his commanders was no different from his attitude to his governors and this we shall discuss in greater detail later.

Whatever one says about Gowon's relations with his commanders, it is clear that Gowon saw military command positions as one of trust, and thought that in such situations little interference was desirable. He was no doubt a fine soldier and a good commander himself, but his very loose supervision of his commanders did lead to some excesses at the battle front. Yet it must be remembered that such excesses, to a certain level, are usual in wars.

If Gowon had to worry about field operations, he also had another battlefield to face. This is essentially diplomatic warfare – peace talks, the politics of relief and attempts to limit the horizons of internationalization of the Civil War.

## The Diplomatic Warfare

Gowon's first action after the beginning of the war was to demonstrate to the world that there were still other options to violence. As a diplomatic strategy it was very necessary for the FMG to leave open the option of peaceful negotiations. Thus Gowon permitted limited intervention by the OAU, which at its Kinshasa summit appointed a consultative mission of six Heads of State, headed by Emperor Haile Sellasie I of Ethiopia. This committee visited the FMG on 22 and 23 November 1967 and agreed that:

as a basis for return of peace and normal conditions in Nigeria, the secessionists should renounce secession and accept the present structure of Federal Nigeria as in Decree No. 14 of 1967.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, this incensed Ojukwu and his fellow secessionists so much that they made it clear that Biafra's sovereignty was not negotiable. Yet further efforts were made by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Mr Arnold Smith. Two attempts by Mr Smith to get both parties together in London failed. Finally, he succeeded in bringing the two sides to meet in London on May 6, 1968. It was this preliminary meeting which set the stage for the Kampala peace talks later.

The Kampala peace talks started on 23 May and finally packed up or broke down at the end of May. The secessionist delegation staged a walkout against:

- (1) what they saw as Nigeria's attempt to dictate, rather than negotiate terms;
- (2) Nigeria's attempt to take advantage of the military situation at home;
- (3) Nigeria's refusal to call for a cease-fire before negotiations could continue and

(4) Nigeria's refusal to withdraw Federal troops to their positions before the Civil War.

On the other hand, Chief Anthony Enahoro saw the secessionist demands as mere obscurantist ploys. He could not understand how the secessionists could even contemplate an unconditional cease-fire or even the withdrawal of Federal troops to positions occupied before the outbreak of the war. He insisted that peace talks could go on while fighting was still raging.

Again other efforts continued. The British government sent its Minister of State in the Commonwealth Office, Lord Shepherd, to hold separate discussions with both sides. Meanwhile, the OAU Consultative Committee arranged separate meetings between the two belligerents in Niamey, Niger. General Gowon addressed the meeting on July 16, while Ojukwu addressed it on July 18, 1968. Both sides then agreed to meet at Addis Ababa for more peace talks as well as to examine proposals for sending relief to the victims of the war.

On August 5, Chief Anthony Enahoro led the Nigerian delegation to the talks at Addis Ababa. Ojukwu initially led his delegation, then withdrew for Dr Eni Njoku to act as the leader of the secessionist group.

There were still very wide gaps between them except in the area of dispatching relief to war victims. Even in this area, there were substantial differences between the two groups. In principle both parties agreed to the Emperor's compromise formula that land and air mercy corridors be created for sending relief to war victims. But again, this talk was deadlocked and had to pack up on September 9, 1968.

There were many other attempts at seeking peaceful solutions to the crisis. Following the report of the OAU of the Consultative Committee, the OAU Assembly of Heads of States meeting in Algiers in September 1968 appealed to Ojukwu to co-operate with the federal government to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. On the other hand, it appealed to the FMG to declare a general amnesty and co-operate with the OAU mission to usher in a basis of mutual confidence.

A number of other peace efforts were undertaken by individuals and groups. Among these were attempts by Lord Shepherd in December 1968, Mr Maurice Foley (Under-Secretary in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) Lord Fenner Brockway (a British Labour Peer) and James Griffiths (a Labour MP). In January 1969, Chief Awolowo led a Nigerian delegation to London to hold discussions with the secessionists; again this failed. Then a new peace move was embarked upon by the Afro-Malagasy Common Organization

(OCAM) in February 1969, but Nigeria while welcoming it, thought she still had enough confidence in the ability of the OAU mission to find a solution, and thus politely decline the offer.

The other major attempt was in April 1969 at Monrovia, where the OAU mission again met and failed to resolve the issue. The mission, however, appealed to both sides to 'accept in the supreme interest of Africa, a united Nigeria, which ensures all forms of security to all citizens.' It noted that while the Nigerian government accepted its proposals for peace, the secessionists did not.

Then came the OAU Assembly of Heads of States in Addis Ababa on 6 September, 1969. This assembly resolved that both sides of the Nigerian conflict should negotiate for a united Nigeria so as to restore peace and stability to the country. It was at this conference that Gowon addressed members, stating clearly the issues involved in the crisis. As he had always insisted, there could be no peace unless the secessionists:

- (1) renounced secession; and
- (2) accepted the twelve states structure as the basis for the future existence of Nigerian groups.

In diplomatic overtures to those countries which had recognized Biafra Gowon extended an olive branch when he said:

Even where we are hurt, we will never be a party to any attempt to undermine the government of any member state. I sincerely believe that African countries can never make it, if we adopt the attitude of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We should not plan to subvert others just because they do not accept our point of view on matters affecting our national interest and the destiny of Africa. Long live Africa.

Gowon had ensured that he did not give the world the impression that he and his colleagues were not interested in peace talks or negotiations, even though he was aware that the efforts were futile. Diplomatically, his willingness to talk eased the pressure on the government; for Biafra's propaganda was much better than Nigeria's and it was having an anti-Nigeria effect in many countries.

The Nigerian young Head of State had to cope with greater intrigues and intricacies of the international scene than pressures for peaceful solution to the conflict. Gowon had to wade through rough diplomatic waters in order to keep the country together and prevent internationalization of the conflict. His good sense and patience helped. This is our next focus.

The position of the major world powers on the Nigerian crisis

varied from one power to the other. The United States made its policy clear at the beginning of the conflict. The US Government would recognize only the Federal Government of Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> However, it declared that it would not sell any arms to any of the belligerents in the Nigerian Civil War. In fact, the United States refused to give Nigeria export permits allowing the purchase of arms on a commercial basis from US manufacturers ostensibly because 'the United States was basically opposed to interference in the internal affairs of another state.'<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the US Secretary of State, Mr Dean Rusk, made it clear that 'Nigeria was a British responsibility.'

These statements drew angry responses from the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. The Federal Government pointed out that Nigeria never applied for military aid, as had been publicized in the United States. The government expressed its scepticism with regard to the reasons which the State Department gave for denying Nigeria export permits. In fact, a few days after the US Government denied the Federal Government export permits, there were reports of three C130 Hercules transport planes with 150 personnel and 45 paratroopers sent to Zaire (Congo) to help Mobutu fight against rebels, by the United States. Given the US stand on Nigeria, this could be regarded as 'interference in the internal affairs of another state'.

The Federal Government of Nigeria reacted quite angrily to Dean Rusk's statement. It reminded the United States that Nigeria had become an independent and sovereign State. It was no longer a British colony.<sup>29</sup>

To the Federal Government of Nigeria, the US's refusal to allow Nigeria buy arms from manufacturers was an indirect way of supporting the secessionists, who would (in any case) buy arms from the black market. As far as the US was concerned, it would supply relief to both sides engaged in the Civil War. But as Cervenka aptly pointed out, the US policy of 'carrying out our moral obligations to respond effectively to humanitarian needs and not involving ourselves in the political affairs of others' did not work out that way.

The US humanitarian intervention in the conflict had distinctly political implications. First of all, it involved direct dealings with the Biafra authorities, which considerably strengthened the status of Biafra in striving for recognition. Secondly, the establishment of contact with Ojukwu's regime led to an increase of the pressure by the Biafran lobby in the US for some kind of diplomatic relationship.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, it is important to note that there were pressures from within the Congress and among the American populace that the US Government should change its policy. That the US refused Nigeria

permits to buy arms from its 'traditional' source in time of trouble signalled to Nigerian decision-makers that the US did not wish their country well. The relationship between Nigeria and the US reached near freezing point. However, the fact that the US gave no open recognition to the secessionists consoled the Federal Government. It would seem, however, that the US really regarded Nigeria as being in the British political sphere. Its policy may be summed up as 'trailing the British policy in Nigeria', while sitting on the fence. Moreover, Nigeria was not of 'vital interest' to the US, as some State Department officials saw it then.

The British were even more indecisive about their position at the initial stages of the conflict. The British adopted a 'wait and see' attitude. As the Minister of State in the Commonwealth Office told Parliament on 25 January, 1968: 'We are neutral to both sides . . . We certainly are not helping one side or the other.'<sup>31</sup>

The British Government was not going to stop the 'traditional' supply of arms to Nigeria, even though it was not going to sell combat planes to Nigeria. After the invasion of the Midwestern State of Nigeria, the British policy of sitting on the fence faced a new challenge. As the British Foreign Secretary put it to the House of Commons on 12 June, 1968, to cut off aid to Nigeria would be a way of telling the Federal Government:

We have put you in a position where you are heavily dependent on us for the instruments of power. Now when you are faced by a challenge to your authority, we will put you at a very serious disadvantage.

Such a policy would hurt British interests in Nigeria which had been estimated at 568 million dollars – about 53% (percent) of all foreign investments in Nigeria. It was clear that British Government officials were quite aware of the delicate position of Britain in the Nigerian Civil War. This was evident in Mr Maurice Foley's<sup>32</sup> address to the Parliament on 13 March, 1969.

We have links extending over 100 years, we have 16,000 people in Nigeria, great investments and much trade of enormous mutual benefit to Nigerians and ourselves. We have no other honourable option.

True, Britain's options were few. It had become clear that the Organization of African States stood for maintaining the territorial integrity of Nigeria. Only a few African states had recognized Biafra by the end of 1969.<sup>33</sup> The British Foreign Secretary could not have been more correct when he told the House of Commons on 13 July,

1969, that to cut off arms sales to Nigeria 'would certainly have been a profound estrangement of ourselves from Nigeria and from Africa as a whole. It would have involved a great risk to the British people and to British interests in Nigeria.'

Moreover, it had become clear that Nigeria was going to buy arms from the Soviet Union. Britain was afraid of being displaced as the main source of arms supply to Nigeria. In fact Nigerian Government officials made it clear that British interests would suffer if she cut off arms supplies to Nigeria. Chief Anthony Enahoro, Nigeria's Information Commissioner, drove this point home in his letter to the British Parliament.

The first (effect of the stoppage) as I have indicated, would be to compel the Federal Government to turn to other sources of supply. The second is that the stoppage would confirm in the Nigerian mind allegations that the British Parliament and people do not really care whether or not Nigeria remains a united country.<sup>4</sup>

The British Government's initial policy of vacillation changed to one of support for the Federal Government. British arms certainly contributed to the Federal Government's military performances in the Civil War. The British case illustrates the relationship between national self-interest and foreign policy. In a sense, it may be suggested that Britain's non-recognition of secession in Nigeria, might have kept the US from recognizing Biafra.

Other major support for the Federal Government came from the Soviet Union. Nigeria had been cold to the Soviet Union, and in fact the Federal Government had banned the distribution of Soviet literature in the country. During the Civil War, Nigeria turned to the Soviet Union for the purchase of arms, having been denied export permits to buy arms in the US and the right to buy jets from Britain - her two main sources of arms supply.

The Soviet Union was anxious to maintain 'One Nigeria' against what it regarded as the attempts by imperialists to balkanize Africa for greater exploitation.<sup>5</sup> Its calculation of support for Nigeria might have been based on the assumption that African states would not take kindly to foreign interference. Moreover, Nigeria offered a new foothold for Soviet influence in Africa - a chance to effectively oppose 'Western imperialists'.

Nigeria sent a delegation to Moscow in June, 1967, and on 2 August, 1967, Nigeria and the Soviet Union signed a 'cultural' pact - for exchanges in education, arts, sports etc. between the two countries. This was a prelude to the supply of the famous Russian Mig fighters to the Federal Government. Nigeria's new Russian connec-

tion made many Western nations wary. Rumours of Soviet adventure in Nigeria filled the pages of the western press. Of course, Britain and the United States did not hide their anxiety. Western anxiety extracted a historical allusion from General Gowon. 'Going to the Soviet Union, I assure you', General Gowon said, 'was just a way of dealing with Ojukwu's threat. After all, Ojukwu started the air war. Even Abraham Lincoln went to Russia for help to win his own Civil War.'<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, France did not hide its support for the secessionists, even though it stopped short of recognizing Biafra. France gave the impression, initially, that it was concerned with the humanitarian aspects of the war, yet it emphasized the right of peoples to self-determination.

France's position could not have been put more succinctly than by President De Gaulle. On 9 September, 1968, General De Gaulle remarked:

It is not certain that the concept of a federation, which replaces in certain areas to a certain extent the concept of colonization, is always very good and very practical, and particularly in Africa – but not only in Africa, for in fact, that consists in automatically putting together very different peoples, sometimes very different indeed, and who, in consequence do not like it at all. One sees this in Canada, one sees this in Rhodesia, in Malaysia, in Cyprus, and one sees it in Nigeria . . . In this affair, France has aided, is aiding Biafra as far as possible. She has not carried out the act which would be decisive, the action of recognizing the Republic of Biafra, because she considers that the management of Africa is above all an affair for the Africans . . . This means that as far as France is concerned, the decision which has not been taken cannot be excluded in the future.<sup>37</sup>

It is not exactly clear why France sided with the secessionists. It could be De Gaulle's fear of Nigeria in Africa – especially in relation to Francophone African countries. A huge and economically buoyant Nigeria may challenge the position of France in West Africa. That France vigorously opposed any equal treatment of Nigeria with Francophone countries associated with the EEC seems to indicate this fear. There also have been talks of the secessionists entering agreements with French Safrap Oil Company for monopoly over Biafran oil. In fact, one could also hypothesize that balkanization of existing sovereign states had great appeal to De Gaulle – as illustrated by his parochial exhortation to French Canadians – 'Long Live Quebec'.

There was no doubt that French collaboration with the secessionists

encouraged them in their fight. But it also led to strained relations between France and Nigeria - a relationship which took time to heal after the war.

Other actors on the secessionists' side come to mind. These include Portugal, Israel, South Africa and China. Portugal provided a European base for the secessionists; many of them flocked to Portugal after the Civil War.<sup>38</sup> The Federal Government claimed that a number of South African and Chinese mercenaries fighting for the secessionists had been killed during the Civil War. Israelis were said to have trained Biafran soldiers for the Biafran army. Portugal might have supported the secessionists because a fragmented Nigeria provided a more favourable climate for their colonies in Africa. Nigeria's support for the UN resolution asking Israel to leave all Arab occupied land, may have turned Israel against the Federal Government. The Chinese position is still fairly unclear - especially since mercenaries do not necessarily represent their home governments.

What was the international line-up in Africa? After the declaration of secession, the Federal Military Government took pains to point out its implications for other African states. It pointed out that if secession succeeded in Nigeria, other African states could also face the threat of disintegration. The Sudanese conflict, the Eritrean secessionist bids in Ethiopia, the Ewe irredentism in Ghana, and the Somalis in Kenya and Ethiopia - illustrated Nigeria's case.

Nigerian Government officials tried to convince other African states that balkanization of existing states in Africa would make them more amenable to exploitation by forces external to Africa. Moreover, the Federal Government emphasized Nigeria's success over secession would prove to the world that black men could rule themselves.

On the bilateral level of inter-state relations, only four African states recognized the secessionist Biafran Government. These were - Tanzania, Zambia, Ivory Coast and Gabon. It is not clear why Tanzania which had enlisted Nigeria's help in 1964 was the first African country to recognize the Biafran Government. It would seem however, that Nyerere did not see the use of force as the best way to solve Nigeria's crisis. He regretted the fact that Nigerian sovereignty was at stake. 'The break-up of Nigeria is a terrible thing', he said, but 'it is less terrible than that cruel war.'<sup>39</sup> Both Tanzania and Zambia claimed to have recognized the secessionist government for humanitarian reasons.

On the other hand, Ivory Coast and Gabon might have succumbed to pressures from the French Government. The writer has no direct evidence to support his view. However, in De Gaulle's statement of 9 September, 1968, he made capital out of the fact that 'there are states of East and West Africa which have recognized Biafra. Others will,

perhaps, recognize it.<sup>40</sup> One wonders if De Gaulle did not purposely encourage Ivory Coast and Gabon to give recognition to the secessionists – thereby setting the platform for formal French recognition of Biafra. Of course, De Gaulle was quick to point out that 'the decision which has not been taken cannot be excluded in the future.'

It is not clear how far Presidents Houphouët-Boigny of Ivory Coast and Bongo of Gabon viewed Nigeria as a threat to them. A large Nigeria may threaten their positions in Western Africa. But there is no concrete evidence regarding such feelings of insecurity in these two countries.

At various points, some other African countries tried to table the Nigerian crisis at international conferences. Such suggestions by Gambia and Ghana received great disapproval from the Nigerian press. Generally, even those African countries which were against the Civil War did not come out to give recognition to Biafra. This brings us to the role of the Organization of African Unity.

The Organization of African Unity played an important part in the Nigerian crisis. At the Kinshasa summit in September 1967, the OAU recognized the situation as 'an internal affair, the solution of which is primarily the responsibility of Nigerians themselves.' It expressed confidence in the Federal Military Government, and set up a Consultative Committee<sup>42</sup> to see the Head of the Federal Military Government. This Committee pointed out that any solution to Nigeria's problem must be in the context of a United Federation and that secessionists should accept the twelve state structure of the country.

This was virtually an adoption of Nigeria's conditions for peace. The OAU summit meeting at Algiers called on 'all member states of the United Nations and the OAU to refrain from any action detrimental to the peace, unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria.'<sup>42</sup> The OAU stand, it may be suggested, acted as a curb on the actions of many countries outside Africa which would have liked to recognize Biafra. It is interesting that Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union and France all recognized the importance of an African solution to the crisis. It seemed as if none of the major powers wanted to alienate African states. In fact, the OAU appealed 'to all governments, international organizations, humanitarian institutions as well as to all political, moral and religious bodies in the world to facilitate the implementation of the present resolution and to desist from any action, gesture and attitude likely to jeopardize the efforts of the OAU in finding a solution to the Nigerian crisis.'<sup>43</sup>

If the OAU was unable to stop the four African countries from recognizing Biafra, if it was unable to effect any settlement of the Nigerian crisis at the Kampala, Niamey and Addis Ababa peace talks, it was at least able to restrain extra-continental forces from

interfering blatantly in the Nigerian crisis. The concept of 'Pan Africana' might not have been very successful when applied, in practice, to Nigeria, but it did dissuade non-African forces from imposing a solution on Nigerians.

Thus again, on the diplomatic front, Gowon won a hectic, even if at times a very unsettling battle in his effort to keep Nigeria one. In similar vein, the politics of relief interfered with Gowon's efforts to end the war. The activities of some relief agencies bordered on political interference and Gowon did not hesitate to tell them so. On 19 July, 1968, he told representatives of international relief agencies that he would not tolerate political interference from any relief organization. He specifically mentioned OXFAM and CARITAS, charging them with 'paying for space for relief supplies on the same aircraft as were flying arms and ammunition to the rebels.'<sup>44</sup>

The conflict between relief agencies and the FMG came to a climax when on 5 June 1969, a Red Cross DC 7 plane was shot down by the Nigerian Air Force - apparently as a result of mistaken identity. The FMG declared August Lindt (the West African Coordinator of the International Committee of the Red Cross - ICRC) '*persona non grata*' and ordered that all international relief activities would now be handled by the National Commission for Rehabilitation.

For Gowon, the relief agencies were helping only to prolong the war, since the food carried to the secessionist area only went to strengthen the soldiers rather than the suffering masses. Many of these agencies were also suspected of gun-running for the secessionists. Paradoxically, as Cervenka pointed out, the end of the war came as a relief even to these same pro-Biafra groups.

If Gowon had won the Civil War, how was he going to win peace and carry out reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation?

## Notes

1 Daily Sketch, *Sketch Souvenir*, loc. cit., p. 19

2 *Ibid.*, p. 44

3 I am indebted to Col Y. Y. Kure for this insight - Col Kure fought during the war on Federal side, and wrote a project work entitled: *Logistics in Military Campaigns: A Case Study of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, for the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, near Jos, Nigeria (Unpublished)

4 Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 209

5 Kure, *loc. cit.*, p. 39

6 Interview with Gowon

7 *New Nigerian*, 12 August, 1967, p. 1

8 *Ibid.*

9 Interview with Gowon

- 10 His statement; 'I am resolved this crisis won't continue for long. Let's all put our shoulders together to the wheel and end it by March 31, 1968,' has been interpreted as a deadline.
- 11 Broadcast on March 31, 1968, in *Faith In Unity*, *op. cit.*, p. 97
- 12 Kure, *loc. cit.*, p. 44
- 13 Interview with Gowon
- 14 Daily Sketch, *op. cit.*, p. 50
- 15 Zdenek Cervenka, *A History of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Ibadan: Ombonjo Press, 1972) p. 69
- 16 This became a moot point as secessionists complained that it was their main civilian targets which were being bombed. Very few remembered that secessionist B-26 and helicopters hardly bombed military targets with their home-made bombs. They concentrated on civilian targets.
- 17 See General Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70* for details from the perspective of the Commander of the Third Marine Commandos. Also see Alexander Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: The Fourth Dimension, 1980) for the secessionist perspective. Another pro-secessionist perspective is given by Frederick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafra Story*. Also see, Oja Balogun, *The Tragic Years: Nigeria in Crisis, 1966-1970* (Benin: Ethiope Publishers, 1973) for a pro-Nigerian account.
- 18 Cervenka, *op. cit.*, p. 71
- 19 *New Nigerian*, 13 January 1970, p. 7
- 20 In Cervenka *op. cit.*, p. 74
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 74
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 75
- 23 In his broadcast Gowon said, 'Federal commanders are instructed to push on and establish effective Federal presence in all areas still remaining under secessionist control. Federal troops in carrying out this directive will be accompanied by police units and will exercise all care and shoot only if they encounter resistance.' In his order to all his brigadiers, the GOC 3 Marine Commander, then Brigadier Obasanjo, radioed: '... Phillip Effiong today issued what amounts to unconditional surrender. Tactical movement will continue until every inch of Biafra is physically occupied and all rebel soldiers disarmed. Troops will not open fire unless they are fired at. No change from ops order on treatment of POW and refugees'. (Obasanjo, *op. cit.*, p. 123)
- 24 *Spear*, (Lagos) July, 1969, p. 16
- 25 Daily Sketch, *loc. cit.*, p. 50
- 26 This US position seems to have been heavily influenced by its Ambassador, Elbert Matthews, who was known to have been very pro 'One Nigeria'.
- 27 *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, 7 July, 1967; Zdenek Cervenka, *op. cit.*, p. 108
- 28 Cervenka, *op. cit.*, p. 109
- 29 It is understood that Dean Rusk apologized for this statement when he welcomed Dr Okoi Arikpo, Nigeria's External Affairs Commissioner, to his office in Washington, in 1967.
- 30 Cervenka, *op. cit.*, p. 112
- 31 Lord Shepherd in Parliament, *The Times*, London 26 January, 1968.
- 32 Maurice Foley was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office. Quotation is taken from Cervenka, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- 33 These were Tanzania, Zambia, Ivory Coast and Gabon.
- 34 *The New York Times*, New York, 8 July, 1968, p. 34
- 35 The *Izvestia*, 11 October, 1968, carried an outline of Soviet policy: 'If one approaches the present situation from the only correct standpoint, then one must say in all certainty that Biafra's secession is advantageous only to the imperialists... The interest of consolidating Nigeria's independence... and

this can be achieved only by taking an anti-imperialist position . . . demands the preservation of the country's unity . . . a united Nigeria, within the principles of equality would be strictly observed for all nationalities . . . will more successfully resist the imperialists' pressure than a Nigeria fragmented and rent by tribalism . . . ' (Quoted in Cervenka, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107)

36 *Time*, New York, 4 July, 1969.

37 *Africa Research Bulletin*, London, Vol. 9, No. 5, October, 1968, p. 1186

38 See N. U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession in Nigeria, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass, 1971).

39 H. M. A. Kirke-Grecne, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press), Vol. II, Document 218, p. 429. Also see, Julius Nyerere, 'Why We Recognized Biafra' in *The Observer*, London, 28 April, 1968

40 *Africa Research Bulletin*, London, Vol. 5, No. 9, October, 1968, p. 1187

41 This Committee of six Heads of State. Cameroon, Congo (Kinshasa), Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia and Niger, visited Lagos on 22 and 23 November, 1967. Presidents Mobutu of the Congo and Tubman of Liberia could not make it to Lagos.

42 Cervenka, *op. cit.*, p. 147

43 *Ibid.*, p. 148

44 Cervenka, p. 137

## Chapter 10

# The Dawn of Peace and Rising Expectations

Let it be our resolution that all those dead shall have died not in vain. Let the greater nation we shall build be their proud monument forever.<sup>1</sup>

If on November 30, 1966 Gowon had promised, 'If circumstances compel me to preserve the integrity of Nigeria by force, I shall do my duty to my country', the secession of 1967 provided the circumstances, and the end of the Civil War on January 15, 1970, marked the fulfilment of that promise. January 15 has had ironic twist to it, in Nigeria's history. If events which eventually led to the Civil War were escalated by the military coup of January 15, 1966, 1970 marked the end of this tragic process in Nigeria's development.

It was a day of joy for all Nigerians who had been involved in 30 months of fratricidal conflict. At Dodan Barracks, the official residence of Nigeria's Head of State, the secessionists handed, to General Gowon, their documents of surrender.<sup>2</sup> In his speech Lt-Col Effiong (Major-General in the Biafran Army) said: 'I, Major-General Philip Effiong, Officer Administering the Government of the Republic of Biafra, now wish to make the following declaration:

- a) that we affirm we are loyal Nigerian citizens and accept the authority of the Federal Military Government in Nigeria;
- b) that we accept the existing administrative and political structure of the Federation of Nigeria;
- c) that any future constitutional arrangements will be worked out by representatives of Nigeria;
- d) that the Republic of Biafra hereby ceases to exist'.<sup>3</sup>

Lt-Col Effiong then handed over the document to General Gowon. Both leaders embraced, with smiles. Thus, in a very cordial, casual and friendly atmosphere, ended the tragic chapter of the thirty month Civil War. After all the darkness, came light.

In his response, General Gowon reassured the delegation<sup>4</sup> that Nigerians had no malice toward anyone. He stressed that his awareness of the need for reconciliation after the war had necessitated his issuing instructions to the fighting forces to treat misguided rebels with honour and dignity.

Thus Nigerians affected the end of a Civil War that had had many international ramifications without a single international arbiter or force on its soil. It attested to the maturity of General Gowon as a reconciliation leader and the willingness of Nigerians to give peace a chance. The foreign press had actually prophesied a blood bath and a vindictive Nuremberg trial replayed. Even His Holiness, Pope Paul, as he saw the crisis drawing to a close said that unfortunately, in the Nigerian conflict weapons had had a leverage over humanity. He saw the Nigerian war reaching its end 'with the terror of possible reprisals and massacres of defenceless population.'<sup>5</sup> If the mode of surrender of the secessionists did not belie the fears of the 'humanitarians' who had helped to prolong the war, later events proved them to be false prophets of doom.

General Gowon's broadcast to the nation, on the day Nigerians made peace with one another, as brothers, was even more elucidating.

In his near midnight broadcast on January 15, 1970, General Gowon traced the history of Nigeria's crisis and pointed out that the 'war to crush Ojukwu's rebellion' was to 'preserve the territorial integrity and unity of Nigeria' among other reasons. A disintegrated Nigeria, Gowon stressed, would only create 'small successor states' which 'would be victims of perpetual war and misery and neo-colonialism. Our duty was clear. And we are, today, vindicated.'<sup>6</sup>

For Nigeria, the 'so-called rising sun of "Biafra" is set for ever,' and she regarded those who still referred to the Eastern States as 'Biafra' as doing great disservice to Nigeria. He paid tribute to the fallen on both sides of the war and called on Nigerians to show their gratitude to those who had paid the supreme sacrifice for the country to survive, by building a 'greater nation that would be their proud monument forever.'

To the erstwhile secessionists, Gowon repeated his earlier guarantees:

... We must recommence at once in greater earnest the task of healing the nation's wounds. We have at various times repeated our desire for reconciliation in full equality once the secessionist regime abandoned secession. I solemnly repeat our guarantees of a general amnesty for those misled into rebellion. We guarantee the personal safety of everyone who submits to federal authority. We guarantee the security of life and property of all citizens in

every part of Nigeria, and equality in political rights. We also guarantee the right of every Nigerian to reside and work wherever he chooses in the Federation as equal citizens of one united country. It is only right that we should henceforth respect each other. We should all exercise civic restraint and use our freedom taking into full account the legitimate rights and needs of the other man. There is no question of second class citizenship in Nigeria.<sup>7</sup>

He recalled the caution with which he instructed that the war should be fought in order to make the tasks of reconciliation, reconstruction and reintegration easier. In addition, Gowon reminded the in-coming Ibos that 'contrary to the evil propaganda with which they were fed, thousands and thousands of Ibos had lived and worked in peace with the other ethnic groups in Lagos and elsewhere in the Federation throughout the dark days of the Civil War.

On the nature of the 'Dodan Barracks reunion,' Gowon expressed his elation that peace was 'arranged and conducted by Nigerians amongst themselves alone.' There was no foreign power involved. This, for Gowon, was an attestation of Nigeria's maturity. As he put it: 'Thus our nation is come of age. And the meaning of today's event must be enshrined in the nation's memory forever.'

Gowon, however, alerted the nation to the need for a massive relief operation to help the suffering masses in the war affected areas. Rehabilitation and reconstruction of war damages were to commence simultaneously. Similarly, former civil servants were to be incorporated into the relevant public services of the Federation, the details of which were to be announced later. Nigeria was ready to receive relief aid from external sources but not from those countries which had estranged Nigerians from one another with 'their dubious and insulting gifts and their false humanitarianism.'

The victory of January 15, 1970, was a 'victory for national unity, victory for the hopes of Africans and black people everywhere,' which all Nigerians shared. There was 'no victor and no vanquished.'

Thus, Nigeria's Abraham Lincoln closed the tragic chapter on Nigeria's history and opened a new one, full of hopes and aspirations for the future. If his name - GOWON - had been appropriately used during the Civil War to go to the battlements to keep Nigeria together, here he emerged as the leader of a New Nigeria, to Go On With One Nigeria. If it is true that the old cause wars, it is always the young who die in them. The Nigerian Civil War shows clearly how the same old politicians emerged unhurt while many young Nigerians died in wars they did not cause.

With the end of the war and the very simple, yet astonishing 'Dodan Barracks reunion', the pessimists were astounded. The prophets of doom and blood bath were disappointed at the civility of an

African country, when they had expected the savagery of the thickets of Africa's jungle, with its jungle justice. There was no doubt that many of Gowon's lieutenants would have wanted immediate trials and reprisals against the secessionists. This author is aware of many soldiers who still hold this grievance against General Gowon. There were many civilian public servants and old politicians who wanted the Ibos to be punished. For some of these, the reintegration of Ibos into the public service worked counter to the grain of their vested interests and heightened their fears of the resurgence of the aggressive competitions of the early sixties.

Like a leader who knew his mind and what he wanted, Gowon put his foot down firmly in favour of magnanimity in victory. To the chagrin of some of his lieutenants, he hastened the reintegration process. It was a courageous decision to take; it was the right decision too. Many people who accuse Gowon of indecision hardly compare the various cases to see the issues involved. One cannot agree more with Admiral Wey when he said: 'Gowon is a gentleman and he has a mind of his own. But he was over-considerate.'<sup>8</sup> This incident showed that Gowon had a mind of his own and could be stubborn once he felt convinced about a particular policy position. In this instance, Gowon was probably not 'over-considerate', given the fact that Ojukwu was even pardoned in 1982. Perhaps Gowon had a foresight which many of his lieutenants (who later paraded themselves as nationalists) lacked.

At the end of the war, Gowon's magnanimity and mature statesmanship won him loud acclaim in Nigeria and abroad. He was Nigeria's Abe Lincoln, Nigeria's Prince Charming, Nigeria's Saviour. A few illustrations of reactions after the war will demonstrate this point more effectively. One way of illustrating this, is to take a look at the flood of messages to General Gowon.

The Committee of Ibo Intellectuals in Lagos, in their message, praised 'the magnanimity, generosity and acute human nature' of General Gowon, which they claimed had 'beaten all records.'<sup>9</sup> The then United Nations Secretary-General, Mr U. Thant, during his ten nation African tour told an audience of his discussions with other African leaders and their impressions of General Gowon. According to U. Thant, these leaders spoke of Gowon's 'very great human quality, his quality of head as well as of heart; his compassion, his moderation and his dedication to the development of Nigeria and dedication to build a greater Nigeria.'<sup>10</sup>

In its special War Souvenir Edition, the *New Nigerian*<sup>11</sup> wrote this of Gowon:

His magnanimity, his sense of urgency, his honesty of purpose and his devotion to the cause of One Nigeria and the welfare of the

ordinary man and woman in the country are the qualities that have won him the devotion and support of all the people of Nigeria, including the rebels, if only secretly.

In addition, the paper also observed that 'more than anything else, General Gowon will be remembered for building a New Nigeria.'

Nigeria's *Daily Times* even went beyond this. In its editorial of January 15, 1970, it wrote:

It can be truly said of General Gowon that he was moved by Abraham Lincoln's words at a similarly crucial stage in the American history: 'We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. . . . The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave and hearthstone all over this broad land, will but swell the chorus of the federation when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.'<sup>12</sup>

Many such messages of appreciation came in from many groups from within and outside Nigeria. The essence of these cases is to illustrate reactions to his historical stance on post-war reintegration, no matter how unpopular it was in some quarters. Interestingly, nine years later (amidst popular condemnation of Gowon after his overthrow four years earlier) the *New Times* had this to say of Gowon:

Well, a Civil War broke out in 1967 and it was a bloody one. But then there were few people, at the end, who did not agree that the war would have been far bloodier, if the temperament of the man at the helm of affairs had been of a different sort. The Civil War ended in 1970 and Gowon practised what he had always preached viz his disinterest in executing even the worst offenders in the 'enemy' camp . . . This singular act won Mr Gowon lots of friends all over the world, . . . and above all, he regained the confidence of eight million 'Biafrans' who had been fed with endless stories of Gowon's 'genocidal' tendencies for upwards of thirty months.<sup>13</sup>

The magazine went further to state:

Whatever else he might be guilty of, Mr Gowon will go down in history as the leader who kept the nation together during a bloody Civil War. Ironically, some of his rash colleagues, who lobbied him unsuccessfully to launch a vendetta after the war, are currently parading themselves about the nation as true nationalists.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the Ibos owe more to Gowon than they seem to have realized and history is likely to pass its verdict yet.

There was no doubt that Gowon had led Nigerians into war and had come out victorious on the side of 'One Nigeria'. As the *New Nigerian* once correctly observed; 'Yakubu Gowon: He was ready in our time of need.'<sup>15</sup> If Gowon had won the war, he now had to win the peace. In fact, it may be argued that it is a harder task to win peace, than to win wars. What efforts did Gowon make to win peace, reintegrate Nigerians, reconcile them and carry out tasks of reconstruction and rehabilitation?

## The Three 'Rs': Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation

With the end of the Civil War, one of the most immediate demands on Gowon's government was one of providing relief for the suffering masses of the newly affected areas. The need for shelter, food and medicines for the war affected population became more glaring than ever. To further complicate issues was the simultaneous necessity for rehabilitation and reconstruction, to restore electricity, water, transport and communications. So also, was there the urgent need to resettle farms, reopen factories, and facilitate the resumption of normal economic life.

There was no doubt that Gowon had anticipated these problems. The appointment of Mr Ukpabi Asika, an Ibo Lecturer at Ibadan, to coordinate relief matters and see to refugee problems of the East Central State, was a blessing to the Ibos. True enough, Ukpabi Asika stands vilified today among many Ibo people. He, for some, had betrayed the Ibo cause, and after the war had mismanaged affairs of that state. Asika's acceptance of the job was a demonstration of singular courage and belief in principles. Even with a price tag set on his head by Ojukwu's secessionist government, Asika went on to do his job undaunted. He helped, a great deal later, to alleviate the sufferings of Ibos. By the end of the Civil War, Mr Ukpabi Asika had re-established administrative structures in the East Central State, of which he became the Administrator. His government provided a sense of direction amidst confusion, courage amidst despair, predictability amidst fluidity and solace and support amidst misery and abject poverty. In this Gowon's support for Asika's government was most essential, as was the immense cooperation of the military. Human memories being too short, perhaps, not many Ibos have pondered and imagined what would have happened without Asika's preparatory work in Iboland, even while the war raged on. It made the job of resettlement, reconciliation and rehabilitation much easier than these could have been.

Apart from this appointment of Mr Asika and giving support to

him, Gowon also authorized the establishment of Abandoned Properties Committees in all states to administer and collect rents on all properties belonging to Ibos who had abandoned such properties during the 1966-70 crisis. Many Ibos returned, after the war, to huge sums of money which helped to resettle them. In some cases there were problems of restoration of properties; the Rivers State case vividly demonstrated the residual legacies of pre-war bitterness in the system. Over the years, this issue was taken care of. It is most heartening to note that Gowon's foresight led to the establishment of these committees which became very useful later. The United States with over a hundred years since civil war, did not heal its wounds as fast as Nigeria did.

Again, while the war was on, Gowon, anticipating the enormity of rehabilitation work, established the National Rehabilitation Commission, by Decree No. 41. This Commission under its first Commissioner, Mr Timothy Omo-Bare,<sup>16</sup> had the responsibility for 'the collection and distribution of drugs and other humanitarian gifts from foreign governments and from international and non-governmental agencies.'<sup>17</sup> This Committee was very functional to the achievement of rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes in the Eastern States. Its work assumed tremendous proportions after the war.

One of the most immediate tasks which confronted Gowon, after the Civil War, was that of organising emergency relief supplies to the ordinary man, emerging from the war. The Federal Government, through the National Commission for Rehabilitation (NCR) and the Nigerian Red Cross Society performed admirably well. They fed, clothed and provided medical care for the ordinary citizen. Their work was made a bit easier by the cooperation of individual Nigerians and state governments all over the country who donated food, cash and other forms of aid towards providing relief for their brothers.

Thus, by the end of the war, Nigeria had confidence to tell the world that what she needed was not food. The Nigerian Red Cross was feeding about 700,000 people daily in the Eastern States. It had also stockpiled 13,000 tons of food and was assembling another 7,000 tons by the end of January 1970.<sup>18</sup> As Nigeria's Commissioner for Information, Chief Anthony Enahoro clearly pointed out in January 1970, Nigeria's immediate needs were for assistance aimed at solving acute transportation problems, and reopening public utilities and restoration of social services - not food.<sup>19</sup> Britain's offer of twenty vehicles was very helpful at this stage of relief operations.

In his broadcast at the end of the war, Gowon had called for volunteers; doctors, nurses, engineers, technicians, builders, plumbers, mechanics, administrators and skilled hands. In a short time, fifteen doctors and fifty nurses were rushed to the Ibo heartland to embark on mercy operations alongside nine hundred Nigerian Red

Cross officials and one hundred and fourteen foreign Red Cross officials. In addition, the Federal Government made available two million Naira (i.e. one million Nigerian pounds then) for relief activities.

The warmth of reception accorded the secessionists back into the Nigerian fold was amply demonstrated by the magnitude of donations made to war relief activities. So impressed was the British Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr Maurice Foley, with Nigeria's post-war efforts he witnessed during his visit, that he confessed: 'I have been moved by the spirit of reconciliation and brotherhood which is guiding the Nigerian people and their leaders.'<sup>20</sup> The Observer team also confirmed this impression. According to this team, there was no 'evidence of genocide in the newly liberated areas visited.' In fact, they noted that 'within the limitations of available transport, federal troops are carrying food to where it is most needed and refugees wherever possible.'<sup>21</sup>

The relief operations were effectively handled by Nigerians within the period of the first three months. If Gowon had been angry with the famous 'humanitarians'; 'Let them keep their blood money, we don't need their help, we can do it ourselves', the way the relief exercise was handled buttressed his confidence in Nigerians.

In a major act of reconciliation, Gowon announced details of reunion. For public servants, there were a number of categories. (a) All those secessionists who were members of the Eastern Nigerian Public Service should return to their respective state governments for re-absorption. (b) Federal Civil Servants transferred to the former Eastern Nigerian Public Service, should report in the first instance to their respective state governments for re-absorption; they were eligible for absorption in the Federal Civil Service if they so desired and applied through their State Public Service Commissions for transfer to federal service. (c) Federal officers on posting to federal offices in the former Eastern Nigeria, should report at Benin, Calabar, Enugu, and Port Harcourt, to the respective state governments as agents of the Federal Government; state governments would then advise appropriate Federal ministries and departments, which would then issue instructions to officers concerned. (d) Those public servants who left posts without formal transfer, and who had therefore been dismissed or had their appointments terminated, were to register with respective state governments and apply through these for reinstatement in Federal Public Service, if they so desired. (e) Officials of statutory corporations were to be covered by the above categories.

The Federal Government was at pains to point out that re-absorption into federal and state public services would not 'prejudice the career prospects of those who remained in their posts throughout the crisis to serve their country.' An example was the typical case of

'where an officer had been appointed to the post previously held by a returning public official, the present incumbent will continue to hold the post and a suitable arrangement will be made for the deployment of the returning official.'<sup>22</sup> This was very important because of (1) the apprehension among certain incumbents, and (2) the erroneous impression it might create that secession paid and that those who had manned the post in times of the nation's turbulence only qualified to harvest occupational insecurity.

As for the military, the case of Biafran soldiers was to be reviewed by a Board of Officers<sup>23</sup> which was to probe the war activities and roles of officers on the secessionist side. At the end of the exercise, quite a number of officers were re-absorbed, some were dismissed from the Nigerian military service, while those Nigerian officers who had participated in the January 1966 coup and those who had helped secessionist forces to invade the former Midwest (now Bendel State) were detained for a further period.<sup>24</sup>

Otherwise, there were no summary trials or executions. There were no humiliations and dehumanization. While federal forces had won the war clearly and resoundingly, they had shown compassion and magnanimity in triumph. The Gowon 'no victor, no vanquished' *requiem* to the war, was amply demonstrated in his handling of ex-rebels. Most of the properties Ibos left behind were reclaimed by their owners, in addition to rents paid on houses during the war. Ibos soon came back into the economic stream with greater vigour and determination than seen before the war. Could a reconciliation have ever been so fast? Few cases, if ever, in history experienced the speed at which Nigeria's war wounds healed, fewer still, effected as much reconciliation and reintegration in the context of international meddling and scepticism. It is a tribute to General Gowon that he did not allow the pride and joy of victory go to his head. He was not drunk with power nor was he impressed with the exhibition of power, even when he could have conveniently used it, as some of his colleagues had urged him to do. Gowon, as a gesture of reintegration appointed Mr J.O.J. Okezie into the Federal Executive Council to represent the East-Central State at the federal level. Similarly, Mr Ukpabi Asika was appointed as a member of the Supreme Military Council, even though a civilian.

With emergency relief activities completed, the Federal Government now turned more effectively to the issue of rehabilitation and reconstruction of war damaged areas which had been going on since 1968. In addition, it had to embark on the 'reactivation and development' of the rest of the economy that had suffered because of the war which had punctuated normal development process.<sup>25</sup> The typical problems of rehabilitation and resettlement, as enunciated by the FMG included:

- (1) the disabled and the needy who had to be cared for in special institutions or for longer periods;
- (2) persons whose means of livelihood were seriously disrupted by the war;
- (3) demobilized armed forces personnel to be trained and placed in gainful employment in civilian life;
- (4) productive assets damaged or dislocated during the war, to be resuscitated as a matter of urgency; and
- (5) restoration of dislocated and damaged infrastructural services such as roads, ports, rail and airports.<sup>26</sup>

In achieving the above objectives, the National Commission for Rehabilitation and the Nigerian Red Cross, as well as the Nigerian armed forces played important roles.

As a first step towards tackling post-war economic problems and tasks of rehabilitation and reconstruction, Gowon announced his post-war budget. In his budget speech, Gowon announced a total revenue of ₦556m to an expenditure of ₦536m, thus creating a surplus of ₦20m. He promised that a post-war National Reconstruction and Development Plan for 1970-74 would be launched in 1970 with definite objectives and priorities. The political and administrative programmes of the military, which were interrupted, would be clearly spelt out, indicating the tasks to be achieved before the military handed over power to civilians.

While the Federal Government could not pay compensation for all war damages, a committee was to assess the 'real cost of the war and suggest the principles that will guide government in providing assistance to individuals and organisations for the purpose of re-establishing their productive capacities and restoring property damaged by the war.'<sup>27</sup>

Gowon, however, warned about spiralling expectations of the post-war period:

But we must not expect miracles overnight. Patience and hard work are necessary. There is no place for irresponsible and inflammatory sectional agitation reminiscent of the debates in the first Republic over sharing the 'national cake.' Such debates will endanger our internal peace and stability and negate all our achievements in maintaining one Nigeria and a thriving economy despite the crisis of the last few years.<sup>28</sup>

However, he promised a review of salaries and wages of public servants.

By the end of 1971, quite an appreciable amount of work had been done with regard to rehabilitation, reconstruction and resettlement. About ₦120 million worth of cash and materials had been expended

on rehabilitation work in Nigeria within the period 1970-71. The value of assistance from abroad was estimated at ₦64.6 million. Federal Government Rehabilitation and Special Currency Grants totalled ₦33.14 million. The University of Nsukka received ₦12 million for its reconstruction, while ₦6 million was spent on rehabilitation of industries. The African Continental Bank (ACB) was granted ₦5 million for its re-opening.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, with massive federal aid, external assistance and efforts of the people of the war-affected areas in self-help, Nigeria recovered faster than could have been expected.

Later in 1970, Gowon's attention turned to the political and administrative programme of the military. Still basking in glory and popularity, a young, happy and assiduous Gowon approached Nigeria's Tenth Independence Anniversary, October 1, 1970, with hopes and high aspirations. In a lot of ways he captured and encapsulated the hopes and aspirations of Nigerians in his broadcast to the nation on this memorable occasion of a Nigeria born again and grilled through the crucible of its own blood. It was a Nigeria, transformed from a 'mere geographical expression' to an organic living entity, nurtured and given meaning to, by the supreme sacrifice of Nigerians.

General Gowon reviewed events of the past years which had led to the Civil War and declared that Nigeria was 'now at the threshold of what could be a great decade of faster development and modernization.'<sup>30</sup> He stressed that the Government was very conscious of the 'needs and aspirations of the ordinary man: for peace and security, a rising standard of living, and better opportunities for his children'. These were matters no government could afford to ignore and deserved priority.

However, because genuine progress could only take place in the context of national stability, an orderly 'progress towards the restoration of normal constitutional government' was necessary. He went on:

We all need courage, realism, and patience in tackling the problems involved in returning the country to civilian rule. It must be done in such a manner that the final hand-over of the government to elected representatives of the people may usher in a period of lasting peace and political stability. We must therefore not rush matters but should proceed very carefully.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, in order to redeem his promise at the end of the 'war of unification' Gowon announced a nine-point programme, (approved by the SMC) 'to guarantee peace, stability and progress in the country'.

This nine-point programme included:

- (1) the reorganization of the armed forces;
- (2) implementation of the National Development Plan and the repair of damage and neglect of war;
- (3) the eradication of corruption in our national life;
- (4) the settlement of the question of the creation of more states;
- (5) the preparation and adoption of a new constitution;
- (6) the introduction of a new revenue allocation formula;
- (7) conducting a national population census;
- (8) the organization of genuinely national political parties;
- (9) the organization of elections and installation of popularly elected governments in the states and in the centre.<sup>32</sup>

Gowon hoped that all these programmes would be completed by 1976 so as to enable free and fair elections in 1976. As Gowon put it himself, 'It is not practicable in dealing with human beings to impose rigid predetermined time-tables for achieving such important and delicate tasks.' He gave examples of so many time-tables that had been announced earlier, and how events aborted their logical completion. However, he went on to set the tentative 1976 target date, which all Nigerians now know very well. Finally Gowon noted that:

In order to carry out this programme successfully we shall require all the singleness of purpose, the courage, the hardwork and patriotism which the armed forces and the entire nation displayed during the anxious days of war. The target year for completing our political programme and returning the country to normal constitutional government is 1976. We shall hasten and try to complete the programme earlier if possible. It is essential that all work loyally together. We cannot afford to be distracted from these tasks by the unpatriotic activities of any group of persons. I shall report periodically to the nation on the progress of the programme.<sup>33</sup>

There were at least two basic reactions to General Gowon's political programme, as approved by the Supreme Military Council. There were those Nigerians who were elated by the prospect of a return to constitutionally elected government. Some of those in this school of thought had expected the military to leave office a little after the Civil War had ended. For some of these (politicians mainly) who had projected ambitions about certain elective officers, waiting six years was a long wait. In fact, during the war, especially about 1969, there were signs of impatience rising occasionally to the surface, that some of these politicians were only tolerating military rule because of the war. They did not see the need for the military to be on the stage for six years to implement some of these programmes which they felt could be completed by any incoming civilian government.

On the other hand, there were many who whilst very happy about return to civilian administration, saw Gowon's target date as premature. For this school of thought, by setting a target date, Gowon was committing himself to the process of escalating political expectations which he would be expected to fulfil. Moreover, this school of thought argued, Gowon had under-estimated various obstacles in Nigeria's fluid political culture. He perhaps, had made the mistake that mutual fears and suspicions among Nigerian groups had been eliminated by the creation of states and had been buried with the Civil War that had just ended. This school argued that Gowon was displaying gross political naivety by announcing the target date, especially since he had shown convincingly the problems of fixing dates in such delicate issues. He was expected by some of these Nigerians to have announced the programme and stopped at that. Since he had promised to make progress reports to the nation, the target date would emerge eventually on its own.

Even from a casual look at Gowon's nine-point programme, some of the issues could never have been achieved by his government or even during his lifetime. How could Gowon and his administration be expected to eradicate corruption in Nigeria within six years? The best he could have done, anyway, would have been to *minimize* the level of corruption. How many countries have been able to *eradicate* corruption from their socio-political and economic structures? Nor could his administration, or that of anyone else, have *settled* the issue of the creation of additional units in Nigeria. It is a perennial issue emanating from human interaction in a socio-political setting.

These lofty ideals had embedded within them some intractable problems compounded by Nigeria's political culture. Could a census exercise be successfully conducted in Nigeria, given the past experience? Was Gowon not making a basic assumption that Nigerians, after the Civil War, were new breeds of Nigerians, with a new political culture and renewed faith in the system?<sup>34</sup> Was it not too soon to make such assumptions? If the basic assumption underlying the nine-point programme was wrong, would it be possible to execute these programmes? Perhaps, Gowon was many years ahead of Nigerians in his basic assumptions about Nigeria's process of nation-building. But how did Gowon's mind work about these matters? Why did he set a target date?

In his interview with the writer in 1979, General Gowon expressed his opinion on this issue and it may be appropriate to quote an appreciable portion of the interview here.

... I can assure you, I thought that unless you set a date, you would have so much problems between the end of the Civil War or when I made that announcement until the time the situation forced

one to hand over the government and it could have been the next day; it could have been a year's time; it could have been two years' time . . . even for ten years or it could have been more. But I wanted an opportunity to do a number of important things . . . We had just finished the Civil War and I needed peace and stability to carry out the various reconstruction programmes to ensure relatively absolute reconciliation . . . One of these programmes was, of course, the economic programme we had . . . I wanted to ensure that soldiers were properly billeted and that they were not left in 'Bashas' or in some of the ramshackle accommodation that they had lived in during the Civil War, throughout the civil war and even after, without complaint. They were able to bear this with fortitude. Honestly, one could not have had a better body of men to lead as the Nigerian Army that I led. There is no doubt about that . . . So this might explain to you the reason why I announced the date. At least if we had not done that, I would have been spending most of my time trying to deal with unnecessary political agitations. The interested groups would have been agitating to get the change speeded up or hurried up instead of concentrating on the essentials of developing the country, the economy, the social development of the country and the various things we needed to do . . . I wanted to produce results, things that would be able to help the country and the people. This is the reason why I had to do it the way I did it. Announcing 1976 did it not give us the time at least to launch two plans and be able to see one completed and the other properly launched and taken off with all the zeal and determination with which it took off, no matter what my detractors might like to say?

Certainly the General did have his reasons for announcing a target date and these are very cogent reasons too. However, his broadcast raised expectations. Once he had made the announcement, he became, in essence, a slave to it in the sense that he was bound by it. As expectations rose, the 'creature of crisis', who had confessed that his capabilities were more effectively demonstrated in crisis situations in which 'you do not have to bother about unnecessary details,' had to pay attention to these now. What were 'unnecessary details' in a crisis situation could be very important issues in peace time or in non-crisis situations.

Does this call for a change of technique from one of essentially crisis-management to one requiring subtlety, foresight, planning and, at times, exhibition of some Machiavellian traits? How effectively did the manager of crisis settle down to the nitty-gritty of peace time politics?

One of Gowon's first steps was the implementation of the second

item in his nine-point programme – implementation of the National Development Plan. The National Development Plan for post-war reconstruction had been under discussion in the course of 1969. The Second National Development Plan, 1970–74 envisaged an investment of ₦3,192 million of which ₦1,560 million was to be invested in the public sector, while ₦1,631.6 million was to be invested in the private sector. One may want to compare this with a total investment of ₦2,372 million in the First Development Plan period, 1962–68, of which ₦780 million went into the private sector, while the private sector was to have ₦1,353.6 million.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, unlike the first plan which was punctuated by crises, the Second Plan took off very well. Nigerians generally agree that this plan was also, in the main, effectively implemented. Two issues in the plan and plan execution, were of such importance, that they need attention. The first, was the attempt at creating certain national ideals in the form of national objectives. According to this plan, there were five principal national objectives:

- (1) a united, strong and self-reliant nation;
- (2) a great and dynamic economy;
- (3) a just and egalitarian society;
- (4) a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens; and
- (5) a free and democratic society.<sup>36</sup>

There is no doubt that these were cherished ideals of most Nigerians. As national objectives, they were very important. The government was so serious about these goals, that it published, for restricted circulation among its members, a booklet entitled, *National Guidelines for the Projection of Nigeria's Philosophy and Action*, which explained these basic goals. It was the first time that Nigerians had anything like a set of national objectives. If these objectives had been carefully and practically propagated by Gowon and succeeding regimes through socialization in schools and political education of adults, this writer believes that it would have helped to create a sense of direction for the country.

The second important trait of the plan was the infusion of a healthy competitive atmosphere. For the first time, states competed healthily to demonstrate which out of them ranked highest in the plan implementation. The first Progress Report of the plan, for example, showed how states were ranked on the basis of their plan performances.<sup>37</sup> The principle of such healthy competition cannot be over-emphasized. It is unfortunate that this competitive momentum later abated and finally died. But it was a good attempt, and it should be encouraged by all governments in future.

For Nigeria, the period of 1970–73 witnessed many other healthy

developments under General Gowon, apart from the take-off and implementation of Second National Development Plan. The period saw Nigeria effect a change from left to right-hand driving which succeeded, even amidst fear and scepticism among Nigerians. On the humorous side, it was known that some people did not drive their cars or go out of their houses for some days because of their anticipation of chaos, and the danger the exercise would generate.

Similarly, Gowon took another positive step in the change of Nigerian currency from *pounds* and *pennies*, to *Naira* and *Kobo*. In effect, Nigeria decimalized its currency and brought it in line with many others in the global economic arena. On the symbolic plane, the decimalization of currency demonstrated Nigeria's attempt to decolonize its monetary system which had been tagged to the British sterling zone before and after independence. The adoption of the metric system was also very important in Nigeria's system of measurement.

Gowon was lucky that the post-war period coincided with a period of enormous revenues accruing from Nigeria's oil boom. It is to Gowon's credit that he embarked on important structural projects such as roads and housing. There is no doubt that no other military regime in Nigeria contributed to the development of Nigeria's roads as much as Gowon's. Even most of the roads built later by the Murtala and Obasanjo regimes were on the drawing board by the time Gowon was overthrown in 1975. His Low Cost Housing Scheme was also another project that was spread throughout Nigeria's (then twelve) states. The housing scheme was to provide houses for workers to rent and own over a period of years. It must be noted, however, that one of the most poignant criticisms of this project, was that the rents were too high for the urban workers they were meant to help. But in essence, the scheme was regarded as useful.

Gowon's perception of the economy as internally dependent on foreign entrepreneurs, and externally bedevilled by the international economic system, led him to take action towards Nigeria's economic independence. He introduced, in 1972, the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree.<sup>38</sup> This was essentially a decree aimed at indigenizing the private economic sector. Divided into two schedules, the indigenization decree provided for short-term transfer of small businesses to Nigerians. Thus Lebanese shops and supermarkets were to be closed down or sold out to Nigerians. It was not surprising that many Lebanese and Syrians naturalized and/or sought naturalization as Nigerian citizens, within this period. The second schedule dealt with larger business concerns which could not be indigenized within a short time. For this group, a gradual indigenization process was planned for its staff. Nigerians were asked to buy shares in many of these concerns.

In many areas, it was found that Nigerians could not buy shares. In this regard, the Federal Government urged commercial banks to provide loans to Nigerians. In some cases, the Federal and/or state governments bought these shares in trust for Nigerians. It was hoped that a time would come when Nigerians would have enough money to buy these government shares. A very sound scheme in principle, there were genuine criticisms of the implementation of this decree. There were allegations of favouritism and wrong-doings in the process of enforcement of this decree by public officials.<sup>39</sup> On balance, it was a fairly successful programme which amply demonstrated Gowon's foresight. Throughout his administration there was a keen, even if not always prudently handled, concern for the economic sector. In a way, this is understandable, given the young and energetic Permanent Secretaries who worked with Gowon, many of whom were economists and political scientists.<sup>40</sup>

Another demonstration of the regime's concern for economic development (thanks to petronaira) was the establishment of the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) to help provide loans for farmers and encourage agriculture. Again, this bank is still operating and has done quite an appreciable amount of work in encouraging farmers. It is a pity that many of the recipients of such loans diverted them to other areas of business instead of agriculture. It may be that the bank has to develop a more effective monitoring system in the future.

In conclusion, the period 1970-73 was a period of rising expectations among Nigerians; it was also a period of activity for Gowon and his government. He basked in post-war glory and introduced measures aimed at creating a Nigeria of his dreams while reconciling various sectors of society. By the end of 1973, however, strains had started to show on the reconciliation leader. The Nigerian political culture he thought had changed appreciably, soon resounded to large and loud echoes of her acrimonious past. Some of his lieutenants succumbed to the societal pressures which usually immobilized its leaders. Gowon started finding out that the assumptions on which he based his October 1, 1970 broadcast were being proved wrong. Wrong also were actions based on such assumptions, especially in terms of redeeming promises made to the public. With more details to worry about, Nigeria's creature of crisis found himself gradually losing a grip on his reconciliatory powers which balanced delicately the barracks and the political arena.

But essentially, Gowon was a great state-builder. From political chaos and fratricidal conflict, he led Nigeria to new days full of hope for greater political stability and mutual understanding among Nigerian groups. Out of disintegration and gross political unpredictability, he built a united and strong Nigeria, with new structures for coping

with her problems. Let us now take a brief look at Gowon's state-building experience.

## Notes

- 1 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Broadcast to the Nation' on January 15, 1970, in *Faith in Unity op cit.*, p. 168.
- 2 In his broadcast, Lt-Col Effiong had appealed to General Gowon, 'in the name of humanity, to order his troops to halt, while an armistice is negotiated in order to avoid much suffering caused by the movement of population.' (*New Nigerian*, 13 January 1970, p. 1) The war ended without negotiation. It was a surrender. As Nigeria's Commissioner for Information, Chief Anthony Enahoro explained, 'This was a military-to-military operation, and so I would like to make it quite clear there have been no peace negotiations of any kind and there will be no peace negotiations of any kind. When the time comes, the people of Nigeria will get together and work out their future.' (*Daily Times*, 17 January 1970, p. 1)
- 3 Dudley, *op cit.*, p. 225
- 4 Members of the delegation included 'Major-General' Phillip Effiong, Justice Louis Mbanefo, 'Brigadier' P.C. Amadi, 'Brigadier' C.D. Nwawo, 'Captain' W.A. Anuku, Chief P.I. Okeke (Inspector General of Police), 'Commander' J.I. Ezeilo; Mr J.I. Emembolu (Attorney General), Professor Eni Njoku, Dr I Eke, Chief A.E. Udofia, Chief A.E. Bassey, Mr M.T. Mbu, Mr E. Aguma, Chief Frank Okigbo, Chief J.N. Echeluo.
- 5 *New Nigerian*, 17 January, 1970, p. 12
- 6 *Faith in Unity, op cit.*, p. 167
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 168
- 8 *Sunday Punch* (Lagos) April 27, 1980, p. 5. Admiral Wey was one of the closest aides of General Gowon throughout the latter's administration.
- 9 *Daily Times*, 17 January 1970, p. 3
- 10 *Morning Post* (Lagos) January 20, 1970, p. 3
- 11 *New Nigerian, War Souvenir Edition*, (1970) p. 2
- 12 *Daily Times*, January 15, 1970, p. 3
- 13 Atedo Peterside, 'A Case of Two Generals' in *New Times*, December 1979, p. 26
- 14 *Ibid*
- 15 *New Nigerian, War Souvenir Edition, loc cit.*, p. 2
- 16 Mr Timothy Omo-Bare resigned his post in January 1970, the reasons for which were not unconnected with the transfer of the Commission to the Ministry of Economic Planning - thus curbing its autonomy and access to the Head of State, General Gowon. This Commission was established in March 1968.
- 17 *Daily Times*, January 17, 1970, p. 3
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 1
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 1
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 12
- 21 *New Nigerian*, 17 January, 1970, p. 20
- 22 *Morning Post*, January 27, 1970, p. 1
- 23 There were two Boards of Officers - one for senior officers while the other reviewed the cases of junior officers. These officers were officers who were formerly in the Nigerian Army. Those who were recruited straight into the 'Biafran Army', stood dismissed at the end of the war which meant the demise of the 'Biafran Army.' See Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck. The Story of the*

*First Nigerian Coup* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1981) for his own side of the story with regard to this 'Board of Officers.'

- 24 Also see. Ola Balogun, *The Tragic Years. Nigeria in Crisis 1966-70* (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1973, pp. 113-114)
- 25 This was clearly stated in, Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Second National Development Plan, 1970-74* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, Printing Division, 1970, pp. 5-6)
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 85
- 27 The Head of the Federal Military Government, 'Broadcast to the Nation, April 20, 1970 on National Budget for 1970-71' in *Faith in Unity, op.cit.* p. 177
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 178
- 29 All amounts in (£) have been converted into Naira for an easier comparative overview in the light of current usage. Source of data: A Adedeji (Federal Commissioner for Economic Development and Reconstruction), *Foundation for Sound Development* (Lagos, Government Printer, n.d. p. 14)
- 30 The Head of the Federal Military Government, 'Broadcast to the Nation, October 1, 1970' in *Unity, Stability and Progress: The Challenge of the Second Decade of Nigeria's Independence* (Jos: Benue-Plateau State Government Printer, n.d.)
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 9
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 10
- 34 This comes out clearly in his broadcast, October 1, 1970.  
I am sure that I can count on the loyalty, devotion and dedication of the armed forces in the trying years ahead as we refashion the fabric of our society, and emerge into the world as a strong and modern nation, deserving of respect from all the countries of the world. I am also confident that my appeal will be heeded by all the citizens of this country, to be prepared to make greater sacrifices, to work hard, to show faith, trust and patience in pursuing the great national goals ahead of us. *Ibid.*, p. 10
- In addition he charged: 'the youth of this country to demonstrate the virtues of this resolution, dedication, and faith.' He also called 'particularly on those who aspire to the future leadership of this country, to be guided always by the highest ideals.' p. 10
- 35 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Building the New Nigeria. National Development Plan, 1970-74* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, The Ideal Printing Works, n.d. p. 1)
- 36 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *National Guidelines for the Projection of Nigeria's Philosophy and Action* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1971, p. 141)
- 37 The performance of State Governments were in this order: Mid-West State (122.7%); Benue-Plateau State (106.1%); Kano (88.0%); North-Eastern (84.3%); Western (80.5%); North-Western (65.4%); Lagos (59.4%); Kwara (56.8%); South-Eastern (50.9%); North-Central (40.0%); East-Central (21.1%) and Rivers (19.2%). See A. Adedeji, *Foundation for Sound Development, op.cit.*, pp. 10-11
- 38 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decrees, 1972,' Decree No. 4, 1972.
- 39 See Paul Collins, 'The State and Industrial Capitalism in West Africa,' *Development and Change*, 14 (1938) pp. 412-14.
- 40 These included. Messrs Allison Ayida, Phillip Asioudu, Dr Edwin Ogbu, Adamu Atta, Ebong Gobir, Obeya, etc.

## Chapter 11

# Gowon: The State-Builder

... Let me salute the Head of State, Major-General Yakubu Gowon, a great man who has through the most difficult circumstances led this nation to baptism and rebirth with honour, charity, courage and compassion, and is truly the father of the nation. *Mr Ukpabi Asika*

One of the greatest contributions of General Gowon to Nigeria's political development was his effort at state-building. By state-building,<sup>1</sup> we refer to a process by which the central (or federal) government of a sovereign state makes its presence felt among the citizens by penetrating and controlling subnational political and/or administrative units. It is the ability of the central or federal government to 'maximize' or at least increase its authority by the use of certain institutions of penetration and control like the bureaucracy, political party, and/or the military.<sup>2</sup>

On 26 May 1968, Gowon analyzed some of the problems in Nigeria's federal system, viz;

Until the creation of states by Decree in May 1967 our constitution was a glaring contradiction of the fundamental principles of federalism. The most important principle, to ensure the success of a federation, is that no single state or region should be so large and powerful as to be in a position to dominate the rest of the units, or hold them to ransom. Under the old constitution the regions were so large and powerful as to consider themselves self-sufficient and almost entirely independent. The Federal Government which ought to give the lead to the whole country was relegated to the background. The people were not made to realize that the Federal Government was the real government of Nigeria.<sup>3</sup>

In a way, Gowon was right. Nigeria's structural imbalance and its concomitant problems had bedevilled the political system in the past. As discussed in Chapter 3, centrifugal forces had weakened the centre and mutual fears and suspicions<sup>4</sup> among Nigerian groups had

led to the Civil War. The regions had demonstrated pretensions of sovereignty to the point at which many Nigerians had begun to feel that the regional tail was wagging the federal dog.

It may be pertinent to restate that, at various times, the regions had threatened to secede from the country. In 1950, the Northern delegation to the Constitutional Conference had threatened that 'unless the Northern Region was allotted 50% of the seats in the central legislature it would ask for separation from the rest of Nigeria on the arrangements existing before 1914.'<sup>5</sup> Similarly in 1953, the Western Region threatened to secede over the issue of revenue allocation and the separation of Lagos from the West as a federal capital.<sup>6</sup> In 1964, the Eastern Region was reported by the State House Diary, after the federal elections, to have threatened to secede.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in 1966, the Northern Region reportedly planned to secede in reaction against unitary government introduced by General Ironsi.<sup>8</sup>

The regions had used the potentiality of secession as political capital in their relations with the Federal Government. However the 'tradition' of using secession as a political instrument for political pressure on the Federal Government was side-tracked when the Eastern Region moved from this situation of potentiality to actuality - by the declaration of the 'Republic of Biafra' in 1967. It challenged the process of state-building in Nigeria.

Political science literature on state-building creates the impression of 'penetration' and 'control' as basically mobilizational within the framework of a unitary government.<sup>9</sup> According to Apter, a *mobilization* is typified by a 'hierarchical authority' structure with its emphasis on organization, with minimum accountability. On the other hand a *reconciliation system* emphasizes pluralism and the desire to reconcile diverse interests . . . it mediates, integrates and, above all, co-ordinates rather than organizes and mobilizes.

In Nigeria, Gowon was very conscious of the fact that penetration through mobilization, with little regard to the interest of subnational groups, was unsatisfactory in its operation - as was vindicated by the rejection of Decree No. 34, 1966. Essentially a 'reconciliation leader' himself, Gowon adopted a compromise solution between Apter's 'mobilization' and 'reconciliation' models. The disadvantages of the mobilization system with its emphasis on coercion and non-accountability is compensated for, by the 'reconciliation' elements of the reconciliation system.

Gowon's government was a 'military federalism'<sup>10</sup> with two conspicuous features. The first was the military superstructure - a military regime in which institutions of popular participation were suspended. In the military hierarchy of authority Gowon as the Head of the Federal Military Government (HFMG) and Commander-in-Chief of

the Armed Forces appointed all State Military Governors who were responsible to him. This negates one of the traditional principles of federalism and fits into Apter's model of mobilization with hierarchical chains of command and 'minimum accountability' to the people.

On the other hand, other institutions of federalism existed and were mainly civilian in terms of their incumbents. These include the federal and state bureaucracies and local government structures, the federal and state judicial institutions, and federal and state corporations - which retained their autonomy in their respective spheres of operation as contained in the 1963 constitution. This constitution had not been suspended, but had been amended to suit the military's mode of government particularly the suspension of the federal parliament and former Regional Houses of Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

At the centre, Gowon made his decision through the Supreme Military Council (the highest policy and law-making body), and the Federal Executive Council (which was responsible for the running of the Federal Government in Lagos). General Gowon's belief in a 'federation with a strong centre but with states having enough power to manage their own affairs,' was illustrated in his address to the governors when he swore them in, in June 1967. He said:

Each state is equal in all respects to other states. You, as military governors, therefore have full powers over all constitutional responsibilities allocated to the states. No one governor is subordinate to another in the discharge of his constitutional responsibilities.<sup>12</sup>

Nigeria's experience had taught this young military leader that there were 'social limits to politically induced change'<sup>13</sup> from the centre, and that units that 'carried forward with disregard for local integrity, amounts to no more than experiments in violence.'<sup>14</sup> Thus while Gowon was bent on centralizing political authority, he wanted to do so with due respect for subnational units - to have 'relative powers to manage their own affairs.'

In the first place, Gowon found that the new twelve states provided a conducive medium for exerting federal authority. As General Gowon himself once stated: 'I am satisfied that the twelve-state structure has, in fact, produced a basis for political stability in that the structural imbalance of the first Republic has been decisively corrected.'<sup>15</sup> The geopolitics of the twelve states strongly buttressed his conviction.

One way in which Gowon's structural engineering (in the form of state creation) contributed to the process of state-building and to political stability was the relative correction of the structural imbalance among subnational units in the federation and their relationship with the federal government.

The largest state in the new twelve states structure was the North-

Eastern State which accounted for only 29.4% of the area as compared with the former Northern Region's 79.0%. The North-Eastern State was not the largest state in terms of population, it had only 14.0% of the country's population by the 1963 census figures (used throughout this book). The Western State, which is the biggest state demographically had 17.0% of the country's total population in an area which accounted for 8.2% of the country's total area.

In this way, the creation of states may be said to have removed a major structural defect which had undermined the legitimacy of the Federal Government in her relations with subnational units. These small states could not easily challenge the authority of the Federal Government to the point of secession.

One of the reasons later identified as having encouraged Ojukwu into secession was the preponderance of mineral oil in the region, which gave the Eastern Region a feeling of financial self-sufficiency. In this regard, the geopolitics of the creation of states contributed a great deal to the process of state-building. The former Eastern Region had produced 65.4% of the total oil output by 1967, while the Midwestern Region accounted for 34.6%. With the division of those states into three states, the areas of oil production were also split. Rivers State now accounted for 57.1%, Midwest, 34.6%, East-Central 2.8% and Rivers State/East-Central States 5.5% of total oil production in the country.<sup>16</sup>

The Rivers State, which is by far the greatest oil production state, has a population of 1.5 million (2.8% of Nigeria's total population), and occupies only about 2% of Nigeria's total area. It did not border any foreign country, as did the former Eastern Region (with the Cameroons). Similarly the Midwestern State accounted for 4.5% of the country's population and 4.2% of the total area in square miles. Like Rivers State, the Midwest was unlikely to secede from Nigeria. This was also manifested in the Midwest Region's support for a very strong Federal Government which it saw as safeguard in a country with large and autonomous regions. Both Rivers and Midwestern States were witnesses to the effective blockade of the coastal ports during Nigeria's Civil War. Thus their access to the sea might not have been very advantageous to them, if they attempted to secede.

The twelve-state structure thus proved a better institutional framework of political stability in Nigeria. By removing some of the elements of suspicion which created friction, such as domination of other regions and the Federal Government, the centre had been strengthened. While the states might challenge the authority of the central government, as President Shehu Shagari later found out, they would hardly threaten to secede. More often, they would combine in order to put more pressure on the Federal Government to allocate more funds to them.

Having decided to have a federal system within a military regime, Gowon was convinced that his new federalism must be one with a strong centre. He therefore took certain actions to centralize political powers. A combination of a number of factors helped Gowon in his bid for greater centralization. They included:

- (1) The new twelve states which were yet to be established.
- (2) The military nature of the regime which legislated by decrees.
- (3) The Civil War that began in 1967, and;
- (4) The increase in Nigeria's petronaira i.e. revenue from oil.

Let us look at the legal and constitutional actions taken by Gowon, (HFMG), in order to centralize political authority.

Taking advantage of the creation of new states and the power vacuum created, Gowon took a number of actions to limit state power. Thus, on 27th May 1967, the Gowon government issued the 'Constitution (Repeal and Restoration) Decree 1967'. Decree No. 13, which repealed Decree No. 8, 1967. Essentially, Nigeria returned to the situation under Decree No. 1, 1966 in which the Federal Government had the 'power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Nigeria or any part thereof, with respect to any matter whatsoever.'<sup>17</sup> In a similar fashion, he had created states by decree.<sup>18</sup>

The Decree No. 14 1967 which created states provided that the states should inherit the powers of the former regions. But subsequent legislations of the Federal Government made inroads into states' constitutional powers. By Decree No. 27, 1967, the Federal Government announced that the 'Legislative and Executive powers of the twelve newly created states in Nigeria are limited for the time being to residual matters.' For the exercise of matters in the concurrent legislative list, 'specific consent of the Federal Government is required' the statement continued. It used to be the prerogative of both regional and federal governments, to deal with matters in the concurrent legislative list. The above decree no doubt placed limitations on the power of the new states.

Some of the federal violations of state powers were directly the result of the civil war and the creation of states. But once taken, these constitutional actions could hardly be reversed, thus adding to the constitutional functions of the Federal Government. Examples of such Federal Decrees abound. The Decree No. 17, 1967, Newspapers (prohibition of circulation) Decree, 1967, gave the HFMG the power to 'prohibit the circulation in the Federation or in any state thereof, as the case may require, of any newspaper.'<sup>19</sup> This was aimed at preventing the *Nigerian Outlook* (later called the *Biafra Sun*) from circulation in other parts of Nigeria.

Under the republican constitution, the prohibition of circulation of newspapers in a region was a regional affair. Similarly, the Federal Government went further to extend the spheres of its powers consequent upon the situation created by the new state structure. By Decree No. 18, 1967, Administrative Councils Decree, 1967, Administrative Councils were created for the former Northern and Eastern Nigeria. According to this decree, the council was to share the assets and liabilities of those former regions among the new states in the Regions; to establish 'Government institutions where necessary in the states'; deploying staff to the new states and considering 'matters which from time to time were included in directives of the Head of the Federal Military Government addressed to the council . . .'.<sup>20</sup> The Head of State was to appoint the chairman of this council. In the constitution, the setting up of administration at subnational levels (regions) was the function of such units. However, as Olajide Aluko correctly remarked, the Federal Government was 'extending its powers by setting up interim administration to fill the vacuum left following the creation of states in the North.'<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the Investigation of Assets (public officers and other persons) Decree, No. 37, 29 July, 1968, gave the Federal Government the power to inquire into the assets of those politicians who held public offices in the civilian regime throughout the federation. Such an expansion of federal authority was an encroachment on the powers held by the former regions whose duty it was to probe its public officers.<sup>22</sup>

The legislations above illustrate that Gowon's Federal Government, operating within the new institutional framework, was expanding its constitutional authority at the expense of the states.

In other cases, the Federal Government took over the direct administration of certain functions which were legally under the jurisdiction of the regions, since May 1967. The marketing Board reforms between 1967-1973 illustrate such absorption of state functions. In 1968, the Northern States had requested the Nigerian Produce Marketing Company (NPMC) - the overseas sales agent of marketing boards in Nigeria, to suspend overseas sales of their groundnuts.<sup>23</sup> In the past, regional government could suspend sales of their export produce. But in 1968, engaged in a Civil War, the Federal Government was anxious to accumulate foreign exchange earnings in order to purchase equipment from overseas countries. The action of the Northern states marketing board was, therefore, seen as negative in its effects on Nigeria's foreign exchange reserves. Hence, the Federal Government issued a decree in 1968 which made it obligatory for the NPMC to take directions only from the Federal Government's Ministry of Trade. The prerogative of taking decisions regarding the suspension of overseas sales of export commodities was

assumed by the Federal Government - the new states could no longer issue orders to the NPMC to that effect.

The Federal Government took further measures which made inroads into the autonomy of states. Decree No. 50 of 18 September, 1968 (the Central Bank of Nigeria Act, Amendment No.3, 1968 Decree) asserted the supremacy of the Federal Government with regard to marketing boards. The Central Bank was to be the only bank to grant advances and loans to state marketing boards; hitherto these states could borrow from commercial or private banks. It also stipulated the size of loan which a state marketing board could call on for its operation at the beginning of each season. Finally, it provided that state marketing boards could fix prices only after consulting the Central Bank.<sup>24</sup>

These measures virtually made the state marketing boards financially dependent on the Federal Government through its institution, the Central Bank. Secondly, it tried to impose federal supervision on the system of price fixing. Thus, the Federal Government was eroding most of the powers of state marketing boards.

While the Dina Commission Report had been rejected in 1968, most of its items had subsequently been adopted through the back door. This report had suggested the co-ordination of 'pricing and financial policies of marketing boards throughout the country'.<sup>25</sup> On 1 April 1973, the Federal Government abolished export duties on marketing board produce. To offset losses by affected states government, the Federal Government made available to the states ₦34 millions in the 1973/74 fiscal year.<sup>26</sup> The HFMG took over the price-fixing authority of the state marketing boards. Thus, in 1974/75, and 1975/76 fiscal years, the HFMG fixed producer prices for marketing board commodities. The NPMC was reorganized to serve as the new 'central sales organization', though state marketing boards were to continue to 'organize local purchases for export produce as hitherto'.<sup>27</sup> In the 1974/75 fiscal year the Federal Government abolished producer sales tax. Export duty on rubber (the only remaining dutiable export commodity) was abolished.<sup>28</sup>

It is to General Gowon's credit that while the states rejected the Dina Commission Report, he did not force the issue. He bade his time until the dust had settled over the issue, then calculated the appropriate moment and introduced most of the contents to the Dina Report, with hardly any protest from the states.<sup>29</sup> It was a demonstration of political subtlety and skills in reconciliation of contending views. On this occasion time helped to transcend the situation. Would time always do that for Gowon?

However, these measures centralized the activities of the state marketing boards. As shown above, many functions performed by state marketing boards were taken over by the Federal Government,



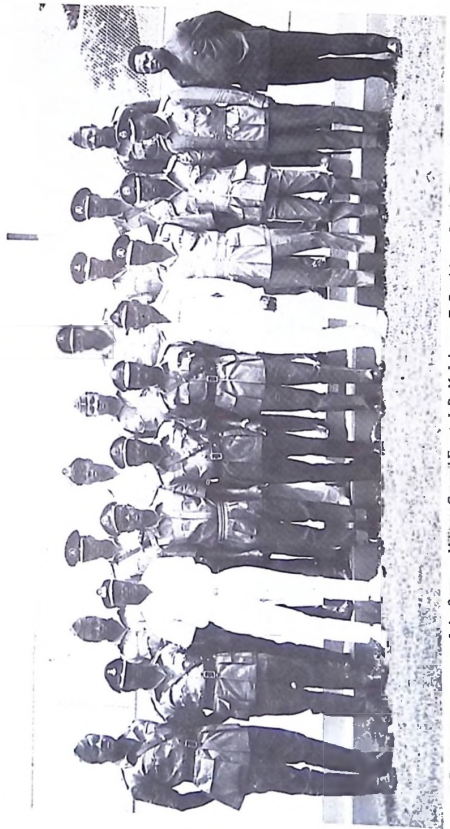
General Gowon with General G. Eyadema, Togo's Head of State during the latter's visit to Lagos



The Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Lt Col Y Gowan hands over instruments of office to the new Military Governors in June 1967. Here Major Abba Kowa (Military Governor of North-Central State) receives his papers.



Major-General Y Gowan swearing-in the first set of Civilian Federal Commissioners in the Military regime on June 12 1967. Here Chief Anthony Enahoro (Commissioner for Information) takes his oath of office.



**General Gowon with members of the Supreme Military Council Front: L-R. M. Johnson, D. Bamigboye, Soroh, Ekpo, Adebayo, Gowon, Wey, Salem, Katsina, Eueue, Asika. Back Row: L-R: Ogbemudia, Gomwaik, Spiff, Urman, Bako, Faruk, Fagbola, Kyari.**



Major General Gowon (on the podium) taking salute to mark his birthday. This was the first birthday celebrated while in office. In the background are Federal Commissioners and some members of the SMC



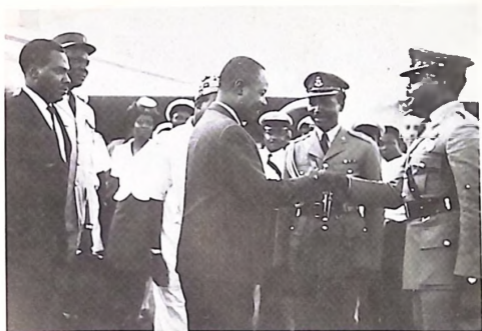
General Gowon with Emperor Haile Selassie inspecting a guard-of-honour at Addis Ababa Airport during an OAU summit



General (then Lt. Col.) Yakubu Gowon on his first official civic activity on assumption of power - the opening of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos. Here he is being accompanied by the Director-General, Mr. Fabunmi.



Major-General Gowon on a visit to the Rivers State. With him are Lt. Commander Diete Spiff (Military Governor of Rivers State), General Gowon, Lt. Col. Shittu Alao (Chief of Air Staff), Capt. Walbet (Gowon's ADC) and Col. Ekpe.



General Gowon introducing Murtala Mohamed to Ahidjo (Camerounian Head of State) on the latter's visit to Lagos



Gowon sharing jokes during a break from meeting with Haruna and Ekpo



Major-General Gowon with Brigadier Afrifa, Ghana's late Head of State on the latter's first official visit to Nigeria.



Gowon in a light mood, his wife and ADC watching with interest.



General Gowon receiving a gift from Boumediene (Algeria's Head of State) after the Algiers OAU summit



General Gowon with the family of Col. K. Gooch, US Deputy Defence Attache to Lagos on the occasion of the latter's farewell visit to the General



Lt Col Y Gowan shares jokes with SMC members during the famous Benin Summit in March 1967. L-R Ekpo, Katsina, Wey, Gowon, Epor, Johnson, Murtala and Saleem.



Respondents to address of welcome by Plateau State traditional rulers at the Palace of Gbong Gwom of Jos.



The return of General Gowon Reception at Heipang Airport Jos in December 1983



Responds to address of welcome by Plateau traditional rulers in the Chief of Jos Palace



At the cocktail party arranged to honour him by Governor and People of Plateau State With the General are Mrs. Victoria Gowon and Mr S. D. Lar (governor of Plateau State)



Being initiated into the Angas traditional institution

particularly the authority of fix produce prices, which increased from 10% to 50% between 1973 and 1975.<sup>30</sup> Only a military government could have carried out these constitutional amendments with so little opposition from the states.

Similar constitutional measures were taken when the Federal Military Government announced that it had decided to transfer secondary and primary education from the residual list to concurrent list. The intention was to give the Federal Government more control over the direction of primary and secondary education, though in practice, the states exercised maximum control in this sphere. At the same time, university education was transferred from concurrent to exclusive list, 'in the best interest of an orderly and well-coordinated educational development in Nigeria.'<sup>31</sup> This policy was aimed at curbing the proliferation of state universities. The establishment of state universities was prohibited, though existing ones could continue to operate.<sup>32</sup>

Introduction of uniform income tax also illustrates federal absorption of certain constitutional functions of the states. In the constitution, the former regions (and the new states) had the power of taxation within their area of jurisdiction. In 1974, the Supreme Military Council announced that it was going to introduce 'a uniform system of personal income tax throughout the country.' It was to provide similar personal reliefs and allowances of taxpayers 'wherever they may be'. It was hoped that 'this would facilitate the mobility of high level manpower and is another step towards social and economic integration.'<sup>33</sup> The 'Income tax Management (Uniform Taxation Provisions . . .) Decree 1975,' Decree No.7, of 24 February 1975, introduced this tax system retroactive to 1 April 1974. Some states expected to lose income through this system. In fact, the former Governor of Lagos State, Brigadier Mobolaji Johnson estimated (in 1974) that his state would lose ₦14 million.

On 1 April, 1975, the Federal Government announced that it was going to abolish the age-old cattle tax 'Jangalai' in order to bring relief to cattle owners on their capital and encourage them to keep their cattle within the country. This tax had never been a federal tax. The states affected most by this decree were the Northern states which had derived local revenue from Jangali.<sup>34</sup>

On balance, the illustrations above show the Federal Government growing steadily in its constitutional and administrative power at the expense of the states. There is no doubt that the presence of the military accounted for the relative ease with which constitutional amendments were made through decrees. In the civilian era, long procedural hurdles through regional and federal legislatures were required for constitutional amendments. The twelve-state structure seemed to have provided an institutional framework conducive to the

As the table below shows, the states are dependent on federal sources of revenue for their yearly budgets to roughly between 30% and 80%. Actually, the federal power of the purse has become stronger than ever. The 1975-76 figures show greater dependence on federal sources of revenue by the states than the other years. With the creation of 19 states and increasing petronaira available to the central government, the trend may continue.<sup>43</sup>

*Revenue from Federal Sources as Percentage of Total State Revenues, 1970/71-1975/76*

States	1970-71	1971-72	1972-73	1973-74	1974-75	1975-76
Benue-Plateau	81	84	83	76	79.3	89
Kano	78	76	81	82	77	85
Kwara	88	82	83	80	82	89
North-Central	70	75	73	71	83	87
North-Eastern	83	85	83	83	82	90
North-Western	83	76	85	79	84	86
East-Central	76	60	54	57	66	72
Rivers	89	84	84	85	94	93
South-Eastern	87	77	67	62	75	84
Lagos	35	45	39	40	33	49
Midwestern	80	73	82	88	88	89
Western	76	79	75	70	62	78

Source: *Adapted from Estimates of various Nigerian Governments for 1972-73 (1970-71 figures up to and including 1973-74 are actual, but those for 1974-75 and 1975-76 are approved estimates).*

In fact the states had started to complain in 1974. Ex-Governor Abba Kyari of the North-Central State had stressed that 'State Governments should not be treated as mere beneficiaries of the federal bounties but as entities entitled to receive legitimate shares. This is the essence of federalism.'<sup>44</sup> In a similar manner, ex-Governor Mobolaji Johnson appealed to Nigeria's Commissioners of Finance Conference in Lagos (1974) to resolve the difficult problem of revenue-sharing between the Federal and State Governments so that: 'States may not suffer from a feeling of financial cramp in the discharge of their normal activities and in achievement of their legitimate aspiration.'<sup>45</sup> Of course, it seems that the states would always complain, only to go for more financial assistance from the Federal Government.

On the whole, the Federal Government's power of the purse had

given it a financial leverage over the states. It is unlikely for any state to be so rich as to threaten to challenge this federal might based largely on petronaira.

From the above treatment of the relationship between the federal centre and the state, it can be seen that from a position of relative obscurity in relation to the regions in 1967, the Federal Government emerged as a political titan within Nigeria's Military 'federal' structure of twelve states. Gowon's deliberate actions increased revenue from oil, and the new institutional framework of twelve states had been very instrumental to state-building in Nigeria.

By the time Gowon was overthrown in 1975, the Federal Government was fully recognized throughout the whole country and its presence was felt everywhere. Through conciliatory and other means, Gowon had created a strong government which emerged as a symbol of an emerging nation. The Civil War and its impact on the populace was to be found in the changed values of Nigerians in the direction of a strong centre. Not only did the succeeding military regime continue to strengthen the centre, the legislators in the Second Republic opted for a revenue allocation formula which clearly gave the Federal Government greater leverage over the states.<sup>46</sup>

If there was any legacy Gowon bequeathed to Nigeria, it was a strong state with instruments of effective administration at the centre and given the problems of fragility in developing states, this was no mean task. After all, the Civil War had proved that Nigeria was not 'a mere geographic expression'. It had become an organic state. It may be argued that Gowon did effectively build the Nigerian State, but that process of nation-building is still going on.

If Nigeria was effectively a 'Military Federal' system in which states were allowed to 'manage their own affairs' how did Gowon relate to the governors and their governments?

At the federal level, General Gowon operated an open administration but believed very much in being modest about his achievements. He kept a number of achievements of his regime quiet.<sup>47</sup> This self-imposed low profile of his regime did create problems of communication in relation to the public and we shall be discussing this later.

In the Federal Executive Council as well as the Supreme Military Council, he allowed his subordinates freedom to express their points of view as candidly as they could. This was confirmed by some members of the FEC as well as many members of the SMC.<sup>48</sup> Decisions were by consensus and not by votes. On very rare occasions did he put his foot down on a decision he favoured. His disposition to democratic processes of decision-making was never in doubt. In some cases, this was mistaken for weakness. His trust and confidence in his subordinates caused him to reap the usual problems

attendant on credulity by a political incumbent. Some of his subordinates, he thought, would demonstrate the sort of maturity and moderation he had displayed at the centre. Many of his lieutenants did let him down and eroded his credibility over time. Being a military regime one would have expected a very hierarchical command structure and very centralized administration.

Gowon's advice to the governors did give the indication that the Governors were not going to be any more than military prefects. While swearing the new governors to office on June 1, 1967, Gowon gave them this advice.

My advice is that you should not approach your new job as politicians but as professional soldiers. . . . As members of the Supreme Military Council, you have a duty to help the Federal Military Government to maintain or re-establish federal authority in your areas of jurisdiction.<sup>49</sup>

The last sentence gives the impression that the governors were being sent to the states as mere representatives of the Head of the Federal Military Government.

Although the governors were appointed by Gowon (the HFMG), they were quite autonomous in their spheres of operation. Gowon had spelled out the powers of the new states in 1968:

. . . As of now the states are vested with the autonomy of powers of the former regions of Nigeria - powers of independent taxation, control of trade, agriculture, forest resources, industrial development, administration of justice, education, health and so forth and their separate public services. These powers can only be reviewed in a constituent assembly in which all the states will be equally represented.<sup>50</sup>

These powers of the states were legalized by the Constitution (Miscellaneous Provisions) Decree, 1967, No.20, which established State Executive Councils and their membership.<sup>51</sup> State governors were empowered to choose the members of their State Executive Councils and were to be autonomous in the areas specified above.

While technically all power resided in the office and person of the HFMG, (by Decree No.1, 1966) he did not exercise such powers to control the behaviour of his governors very much. As a top official of the Federal Government observed, 'we are fortunate in having a person who is prepared to respect the separation of powers as Head of the Federal Military Government, and he exercises minimal possible supervision over his own appointees . . .'<sup>52</sup> Gowon respected the powers of the state and did not dictate to the state governments. In

fact, many Nigerians were surprised that Gowon's governors exhibited so much near-absolute powers which he himself never displayed at the centre.

One of Gowon's military governors confirmed state autonomy in the 'military federal' form of government. Late Governor Joseph Gomwalk explained of state autonomy:

The autonomy is complete. In fact the Federal Government doesn't know what we are doing, in that they don't direct us with reference to what we should be doing . . . allocations are given to you. But when making your own budgets, you don't have to submit it to the Federal Government . . . The federal government reads of Benue-Plateau State budgets in the newspapers as anybody else does. The states are completely autonomous.<sup>53</sup>

Gowon's minimal supervision over the military governors emanated from his personal belief that if his subordinates were given some work to do, they needed power to effect those jobs. While he occasionally chided some of the governors, his belief that public displays of indignation with governors would erode their credibility meant that this had to be done quietly and privately. Of course, for the larger populace which did not know of Gowon's actions, it was frustrating. They could not see how Gowon, with so much power in his hands, could be so soft with his lieutenants.

There was no doubt that the governors had power and that some of them used such powers. Others even engaged in excesses of office in the use of their power and contributed a great deal to Gowon's loss of public support. In Kano State, the early period of the establishment of the state witnessed the sacking and transfer of four permanent secretaries because they disagreed with the governor (among other reasons) about the correct procedures of public expenditure, such as transfer of public money from one subhead to the other.<sup>54</sup> Again in Kano State, a market-stall scandal necessitated a commission of inquiry which presented its report to the state government. Very little or nothing was done about this report.<sup>55</sup> In situations of more strict supervision, the Federal Government would have intervened to review the contents of the report because such scandals could also tarnish the image of the Federal Military Government. Gowon apparently did nothing presumably out of respect for the autonomy of the State.

Similarly, there were allegations of financial misconduct and accusations of gross interference in the judiciary of Kwara State, by Governor Bamigboye. Publicized as these were, the Federal Government did not intervene to set records straight. In fact, this issue was not unrelated to the sacking of a number of civilian commissioners in the state government, which had created a crisis of confidence.<sup>56</sup>

In Benue-Plateau State, about three commissioners were made Permanent Secretaries in that state's civil service. While the governor had powers to appoint permanent secretaries, there were certain procedures to be followed. The making of civilian commissioners (some of whom were relatively junior in the state bureaucracy when they were appointed political executives)<sup>57</sup> into permanent secretaries was cited as one of the numerous interferences of the governor in the civil service structure, rules, and regulations. This action was regarded as demoralizing by many interviewees in that service. But the Federal Civil Service did not protest, again with due respect to state autonomy.

In Kano State, the Secretary to the Military Government (SMG) was pressurized to retire,<sup>58</sup> while in the South-Eastern State, the SMG was sacked from office and humiliated at his farewell dinner party given by the state governor.<sup>59</sup> In Benue-Plateau State the first indigenous SMG was kept out of his office by the use of the police force on orders of the governor, after having been allegedly involved in a sex scandal.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps one of the greatest dilemmas for Gowon was how to balance the demands of federal autonomy of states with the accompanying pressure for accountability. For Gowon, it was necessary for the states to have 'enough power to manage their own affairs,' which entailed as much autonomy for states as possible within the logic of federalism in a military context. Yet because the governors were his direct appointees, their performances reflected on Gowon's administration directly (as he was later to find out - a bit too late). If they had been elected by the states, they could be changed by the electorate. But because they were appointees of Gowon, he was looked upon to control and change them when found necessary. As we shall see later, the relatively unchecked powers of the governors led to certain excesses which contributed a great deal to erosion of the legitimacy of the Gowon administration.

Mr Ukpabi Asika was very correct in his assessment of Gowon's role in state-building when he said:

Yours has been the role of a man who pulled his country from the brink of disintegration, a man who was firm when it was necessary so to be, but who also knew when force beyond the area of persuasion was evil, a man who through personal leadership and practice has won the hearts of all those who never believed he was their friend.<sup>61</sup>

Through those dark days, Gowon had maintained his confidence in a united Nigeria. He had risen up to the occasion and had been very decisive and firm in the circumstances. He knew the limits of force

and after the Civil War gained the confidence of those against whom he had fought. He possessed the personal charm, amiability of character, and the compassion of a great leader. In crisis, he had demonstrated that he could be patient and yet, forceful and humane. He had built a new federal Nigeria out of chaos and had institutionalized political processes.

But Gowon's overly trusting attitude, the latitude he gave to his lieutenants within which to operate was, at times, too much. Some of these lieutenants did not return Gowon's trust as evidenced by their performance, but instead created situations which polluted the political atmosphere for his regime. It is politically paradoxical that such an effective state-builder exhibited traits which showed weakness in relation to his subordinates. Gowon's confidence in the innate goodness of the individual human being was later to be his political doom. But there was no doubt that no other Nigerian leader has contributed to Nigeria's state-building process as Gowon has done. He could be appropriately labelled 'the father of the New Nigerian State'<sup>62</sup> as Mr Ukpabi Asika described him in 1969.

## Notes

- 1 The topic of state-building is extensively discussed in the literature. See, *inter alia*, G. Almond and B. Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Development Approach* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966 pp. 36-38); C.S. Whitaker, Jr., 'A Dysrhythmic Process of Change' in *World Politics*, XIX, No. 2 (January 1967), pp. 190-217; A. R. Zolberg, 'Patterns of National Integration,' in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, X, No. 4, December, 1967, pp. 449-461; J.S. Lewis, 'The Social Limits of Politically Induced Change,' in *Modernization By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965 Chapter 6) Also refer to a critical review of the literature on state-building by S. Gellar, *State-Building and Nation-Building in West Africa* (International Development Research Centre, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Occasional Paper, 1972) in which he questioned the Centre-Periphery concept of state-building. Also the La Palombara, 'Penetration: A Crisis of Governmental Capacity,' in L. Binder, L. Pye, J.S. Coleman, S. Verba, La Palombara, and M. Weiner (eds.) *Crisis and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, pp. 205-232)
- 2 In many new states, state-building has been effected in at least three basic ways — (i) state-building in many African and Asian countries has been effected through the emergence of charismatic leaders, for example, Nkrumah in Ghana, Nehru in India and Sukarno in Indonesia, (ii) state-building may be achieved through political parties — single or dominant parties such as the Convention Peoples Party in Ghana or the Congress Party in India, (iii) essentially through bureaucratic institutions such as the civilian bureaucracy and the military, which have been found useful institutions of penetration. For example, in Zaire, from near chaos Mobutu institutionalized (or is it personalized?) the political process by the imposition of a military government. In some other cases military intervention has created greater political instability, such as in the Republic of Benin.

- 3 General Gowon, Broadcast to the Nation. May 26, 1968. *Faith in Unity*, *op. cit.*, p. 109
- 4 See an interesting discussion by Kirk-Greene, *The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1975)
- 5 Tekena Tamuno, 'Separatist Agitations in Nigeria since 1914', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 8, 4 (1970) p. 568
- 6 Chief Awolowo in his telegram to the Colonial Secretary was quoted as saying: '... I challenge you to deny that the people of the Western Region have the right of self-determination and are free to decide whether or not they will remain in the proposed Nigerian Federation' in Kalu Ezera, *Constitutional Developments in Nigeria*, 2nd Edition. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964 pp. 187-188)
- 7 J.P. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 557-626. Also see Dudley, *op. cit.*, p. 65
- 8 The Northern Region had contemplated seceding in 1966 from the country and arranging an outlet to the sea through the Republic of Benin or through Cameroon by rail.
- 9 A unitary form of government is one in which 'state governments are legally subordinate to the central government.' Ronald Watts, *Administration in Federal Systems* (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1970 p. 5)
- 10 It is an argument that given Nigeria's history as we have discussed above, federalism (at least of a kind) was practised under military rule.
- 11 The constitution was technically supplementary to military decrees. This was pointed out very clearly by the military in its Decree No. 28, 1970, *The Federal Military Government (Supremacy and Enforcement of Powers) Decree 1970* 9th May, 1970 in *Laws of Nigeria, 1970, op. cit.*, p. A129 Also see 'Supplement to Official Gazette Extraordinary', No. 26, Vol. 57, 9th May 1970
- 12 Address by the Head of Federal Military Government, General Gowon, to the newly-appointed state governors, in *Faith In Unity, op. cit.*, p. 58
- 13 John Lewis, 'The Social Limits of Politically Induced Change,' Morse, et. al *op. cit.*, p. 24. John Lewis observed that 'National programmes of unification disrupt the integrity and undermine the existing patterns of authority of local units,' thus creating problems of authority which 'impose restraints on politically induced change.'
- 14 S.S. Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960 p. 11)
- 15 Broadcast to the Nation by General Gowon, October 1, 1970, Benue-Plateau State Government, *Unity, Stability and Progress: The Challenge of the Second Decade of Nigeria's Independence* (Jos: Ministry of Information p. 6)
- 16 *The Struggle for One Nigeria, op. cit.*, p. 53
- 17 Under the 1960 Constitution, the formula for creating states were clearly stated. See, *The Nigeria (Constitution) Order-in-Council, 1960*, Chapter 1, Section 4, (5) Decree No. 14, 1967, *op. cit.*
- 18 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Newspapers (prohibition of circulation) Decree, 1967' *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, op. cit.*, p. A111-113
- 20 This council was not established in the Eastern Region because of the Civil War in this area.
- 21 Olajide Aluko, 'Federal-State Relationship' *Administration*, Vol. III, No. 4 (July 1969) pp. 289-290
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 290
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 290-291, *West Africa*, 27 April 1968, p. 502
- 24 Aluko, *loc. cit.*, p. 291
- 25 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Report of the Interim Revenue Allocation Committee* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1968), quoted in A. Ayida, *The Nigerian Revolution, 1966-1976* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973), p. 8
- 26 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Budget Broadcast' by General Gowon in *Recurrent*

- and *Capital Estimates of the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1973-74* (Lagos. Ministry of Information, 1973 p. 14)
- 27 In General Gowon's 1974-75 Budget Broadcast as Head of State he fixed producer prices for export commodities, such as ₦213 per ton for palm kernel, ₦165 for crops, etc. See Federal Republic of Nigeria, *A Better Life for the People 1974-75 Federal Budget Broadcast* (Lagos. Federal Ministry of Information, 1974, p. 7)
  - 28 Nigeria, 1973-74 'Budget Broadcast', *loc. cit.*, p. 14
  - 29 See Ayida, *The Nigerian Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 8
  - 30 Nigeria, 'Budget Broadcast, 1975-76' (Mimeograph) (released by Nigeria's Mission to the United Nations, New York, U.S.A. p. 15)
  - 31 1973-74 'Budget Broadcast', *loc. cit.*, p. xix.
  - 32 State universities, such as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and University of Ife were taken over by the Murtala Mohammed regime. However, in the 1979 Constitution, university education became a concurrent matter, see Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Decree 1978*, Part II Concurrent Legislative List, Item K, 25-27
  - 33 Nigeria, Budget Broadcast to the Nation, 1974-75, *op. cit.*, p. 6
  - 34 'Jangali' was restored by the Mohammed regime but has since been abolished by a number of states eg. Kano, Kaduna and Plateau States
  - 35 Federal Republic of Nigeria, Decree No. 12 'Interim Common Services Agency Decree, 1968' *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, Schedule 6, Section, 4
  - 36 *West Africa*, 5 November, 1971, p. 1288; later including A.B.U., Zaria and Unife, Ife.
  - 37 S.A. Madujibeya, 'Impact of Oil on Nigeria's Economy (2)', in *New Nigerian*, (Kaduna) 21 June, 1975, p. 5. See also, Central Bank of Nigeria, *Annual Reports and Statement of Accounts* (Lagos) 1974 and 1975.
  - 38 Nigeria, '1975-1976 Budget Broadcast', *loc. cit.*
  - 39 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Federal Civil Service News-Letter, December 1973* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information p. 10)
  - 40 Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the United Nations, New York, 'Nigeria Launches her Third National Development Plan,' *Press Release*, No. 2 (Mimeograph) pp. 3-9
  - 41 Nigeria, 1973-74 Budget Broadcast, *op. cit.*, p. xxv
  - 42 Interview with Mr Allison Ayida, former Federal Permanent Secretary Finance, and former Secretary to The Federal Military Government, Lagos, 21st January, 1974
  - 43 When you subtract revenue legitimately due to the states by statutory allocations, these figures will show a marked reduction. However even those figures demonstrate great reliance by states on federally derived revenues for their budgets. Revenues from internal sources are very small.
  - 44 North Central State Government, *New Nigerian* Interview His Excellency Col Abba Kyari (Kaduna: Ministry of Information, 1970 p. 7)
  - 45 *Daily Times*: 23 May, 1974, p. 13
  - 46 The National Assembly voted that revenue allocation formula should be as follows: - 58.5% to federal government (including 2.5% for the development of the federal capital territory), 31.5% to the States and 10% to local governments. This formula was hotly contested by 12 states who wanted more funds allocated to them. The Supreme Court declared the revenue allocation formula illegal and a new formula has since been approved by the Senate to the pleasure of the states.
  - 47 Ayida, *op. cit.*, p. 15 - Ayida contended in 1973: 'But for the self-imposed low profile and style of government of the military administration, as soon as it decided to undertake major reform measures . . . it qualified as a revolutionary regime.' Gowon certainly believed in keeping his actions to a modest level of publicity and this also affected the style of his government.

- 48 Interviews with Aminu Kano (former Federal Commissioner for Health), Mr Femi Okunnu (former Federal Commissioner for Housing), and Governor Joseph Gomwalk of Benue-Plateau State.
- 49 Address by Major-General Yakubu Gowon to the newly appointed state governors on the occasion of their swearing in ceremony at Dodan Barracks, Lagos, June, 1967. Also in *Faith In Unity*, *op. cit.*, p. 59
- 50 Major-General Yakubu Gowon, at a Press Conference on 1 January 1968, quoted by A. E. Howson-Wright. 'The Creation of Lagos State', in *Administration*, Vol. 2 No. 3 April 1968.
- Also see Governor Esuene's statement that: 'The existing constitution of Nigeria confers on our state the powers and functions and the autonomy of the former regions. These include extensive powers of independent taxation. The Government of the S.E. State is responsible for our trade, industrial development, agriculture, forest resources, education, health, state roads, local government, and the public services.' *Morning Post*, 1 January 1968, p. 1. The Decree No. 14, 1967, *op. cit.*, p. 104 states clearly the powers of the new states: 'All existing law in the region out of which states are created shall have effect, subject to the modifications necessary to bring it into conformity with the provisions of this section.'
- 51 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Supplement of Official Gazette Extraordinary*, No. 43, Vol. 54, 8 June 1967 (Lagos: Government Printer). The State Executive Council was to consist of:
- a) The Military Governor as Chairman,
  - b) The most senior officers of the Nigerian Army, the Navy, and the Air Force in the state,
  - c) The most senior officer of the Nigerian Police in the state, and
  - d) Such members as the Military Governor, in his discretion may from time to time appoint.
- In *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, 1967, p. A117
- 52 Interview. Cabinet Office, 24 January 1974, Lagos.
- 53 Interview with His Excellency J.D. Gomwalk, former (late) Governor of Benue-Plateau State, 24 April, 1974.
- 54 Some of these Permanent Secretaries were transferred to the federal Civil Service.
- 55 It was widely rumoured that investigations into the misuse of powers in the allocation of stalls did mention the name of the governor's wife. The writer did not verify this allegation. The Commission was set up following allegations of wrongdoing by public officers in the allocation of stalls to people in the Kano Market.
- 56 It was popularly believed that Col David Bamigboye sacked the commissioners because he felt he could no longer trust his appointees, who would abet the underground circulation of photocopies of treasury transactions directed against him. It is reliably understood that the governor was reprimanded by the Head of State, General Gowon
- 57 Interview in Jos, Benue-Plateau State, 1974.
- a) Sati Gogwim had been an Assistant Inspector of Education in 1962. He was made Commissioner for Finance in 1967, and Permanent Secretary, Ministry of National Resources in 1973. His colleagues had not then risen above Senior Education Officer, it was understood.
  - b) A. Onazi was in a Teacher Training College before his appointment as a commissioner in 1967. He should, it was claimed, have been (at the very best) in group or scale 6 in the Civil Service. His appointment as Permanent Secretary in 1973 promoted him to group 5.
  - c) Similarly, B. Dusu was an Assistant Divisional Officer in Gboko in 1968. He

was appointed Commissioner and then made Permanent Secretary in 1973. This moved him above his colleagues (who were still on scale 7) in the Civil Service, to scale 5. The appointment of his brother Mr Clement Gomwalk, who was in the Federal Civil Service (External Affairs) as Administrative Officer in group 7, to Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health, Jos, also infuriated some civil servants who suspected that blood ties influenced his promotion to group or scale 5.

These facts were also briefly mentioned in a letter by Mr Aper Aku to Governor Gomwalk, dated 13 August 1974 (mimeograph) pp. 3-4 (unpublished).

- 58 The Secretary was Mr Howeid. This was said to have been in connection with reports on the achievement of the military regime in Kano State, which Mr Howeid had ordered written without the military governor's knowledge.
- 59 Professor Essien-Udom was invited (to be Secretary to the Military Government — SMG) by the Military Governor of the South-Eastern State, from his post at Ibadan University. In February of 1975, the governor announced that the SMG would be 'going back to the University and the fact that I have a new SMG and Head of Service has to do with our own efforts to consolidate and strengthen my own service.' *Daily Times*, 18 February 1975, p. 28. He thanked the outgoing secretary for bringing 'theoretical approaches' to bear on problems which required political solutions, hoping that his period in the government had been a useful experience. At the farewell state dinner party in honour of the SMG, only the Governor was allowed to speak, and the party came to an embarrassing close. It was rumoured that the relations between Governor Esuene and Essien-Udom had started to decline when the latter was found to be instrumental in the dismissal of Mr Abiah, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, Mr E. C. D. Abiah was dismissed from the public service of the South-Eastern State as a result of a 'discovery of irregular financial transactions in the Ministry of Finance,' (*The Nigerian Chronicle*, 29 June, 1974) when Brigadier Esuene was on leave and Col Bajowa was acting on his behalf. More detailed discussion of the above issue is found in *Sunday Times*, 30 June, 1974, p. 1. It was interesting that the Governor cut short his vacation to Europe and the USA for this purpose, and reversed the dismissal order months later, enabling Mr Abiah to collect his entitlements as a retired officer.
- 60 Mr Andrew Obeya, the SMG to Benue-Plateau State Government, had been alleged to be involved in a sex scandal which took him to the court very often. The Governor used policemen to keep him from office until his case was over. While many top civil servants interviewed agreed that it was necessary for Mr Obeya to go on leave for a while so as not to affect civil service morale, many were 'inflamed' by the Governor's method, which they described as an insult to the civil service. Some suggested that the Governor should have left the issue of his leave to the Public Service Commission, and regarded the Governor's action as an interference in Civil Service procedure. Some interviewees claimed that the Governor maintained meticulous supervision over all arms of the civil service. A hardworking man, Gomwalk never went on leave for his eight years in office.
- 61 His Excellency Mr Ukpabi Asika, the Administrator of the East Central State, 'Welcome Address' during Gowon's visit to Enugu, in *Daily Sketch*, (Ibadan) *Ukpabi Asika: Scholar-Statesman* (Ibadan: Daily Sketch, 1970 p. 8)
- 62 *Ibid.* Ukpabi Asika also said '... Let me salute the Head of State, Major-General Yakubu Gowon, a great man who has through the most difficult circumstances led this nation to baptism and rebirth with honour, charity, courage and compassion, and is truly the father of the Nation.' (p. 8)

## Chapter 12

# Dilemmas and Frustrations

Decision-making is the easiest thing to do. This is why dictators come top. But the situation is not the same if you want to be fair to all shades of opinions and views. I always want to consider the ramifications of my decisions. I want decisions that will stand the test of time.<sup>1</sup>

While Gowon had demonstrated beyond doubt that he was an effective state-builder, his energies were soon to be taxed by a number of dilemmas in Nigeria's political system. These dilemmas emerged from 1973 and later immobilized him, as they did to his predecessors. Soon the strains became manifest frustrations. Issues which posed problems for the Gowon administration included: the nine-point political programme announced in 1970; Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC); Udoji salary awards and inflationary traits; labour strikes; and a change for Gowon of his lieutenants who had been in office since 1967.

Let us turn to some of the issues in the nine-point programme to see how Gowon made progress with their implementation. We will look at the census exercise of 1973 first.

### 1973 Census Exercise

In a genuine effort to carry out his promise of holding a national census in order to help in effective planning, Gowon made arrangements for a national census in 1973. On July 27, 1973, General Gowon formally inaugurated the National Census Board, under the chairmanship of Nigeria's former Chief Justice, Sir Adetokumbo Ademola. This Board had ₦16.5 million voted for its activities and later got ₦3.8 million as an additional grant.<sup>2</sup>

The country was divided into 130,000 constituencies, and the board employed 130,000 enumerators, who were accompanied by 130,000 soldiers. Other officers included 20,000 civilian supervisors and 20,000 army officers.<sup>3</sup> The exercise commenced on November 25,

and ended December 1st, 1973. On the eve of the exercise, Gowon appealed to Nigerians to stay in their places of abode to be counted. He reminded the nation that census was one of the priorities in the FMG's political programme announced in 1970. He declared:

It is the duty of every citizen to give honest information during this census; anybody who gives false information will be doing a great disservice to the nation and to the future generations yet unborn. I trust that you will refrain from any action whatsoever, that is likely to result in an inaccurate census count or which in any way will place the qualities of the information collected in doubt.<sup>4</sup>

Those who remember the problem which trailed the census exercises of 1962 and 1963, realize that Gowon's appeal was important. After the census exercise, Nigerians waited anxiously for the result.

Although Gowon had promised the nation that the census results would be released in the first quarter of 1974, problems of retrieval of papers from states and processing of papers delayed the announcement until May 10, 1974. In his broadcast, Gowon announced that the SMC had considered the preliminary results of the national population census as submitted by the National Census Board. These figures were only provisional and thus were subject to necessary modifications and adjustments 'in the light of post-enumeration tests and checks being conducted by the board. Final figures could only be given after the post-enumeration exercise. The provisional figure for Nigeria was 79.76 million. The breakdown by states was as follows: Benue-Plateau, 5.17; East-Central, 8.06; Kano, 10.90; Kwara, 4.64; Lagos 2.47; Midwest, 3.24; North-Central, 6.79; North-Eastern, 15.38; North-Western, 8.50; Rivers, 2.23; South-Eastern, 3.46; and Western, 8.92.<sup>5</sup> Gowon stressed that he was only releasing the results then, 'to avoid delay and unnecessary speculations that are invariably associated with those delays.'<sup>6</sup>

Sensitive as census exercises are in Nigeria, one was not surprised that Gowon was very cautious in stressing the provisional nature of the figures. Yet, even that did not stop reactions. While basically, most people in the Northern states accepted the provisional results, most of the Southern states were unhappy with the provisional figures. The provisional figures gave the former Northern Region an increase of 72.4% from the 1963 census exercises. The former Eastern region had an increase of 11%; Western Region had a decrease of -6.0% (even though parts of the Western region had been merged with Lagos in 1967); the former Midwestern region experienced an increase of 27.6% and Lagos, 71.5% (note that she also gained additional population in 1967). Total increase above 1963 figures, was 43.3%.<sup>7</sup>

The Southern States had hoped that 1973 would reverse what had

become dubbed as the 'tyranny of population' by the Northern region. Not only are census figures important for development plans and distribution of resources, they have political saliency in the context of one man, one vote as we discussed in Chapter 3. It is interesting that when it came to census figures, the old North - South line of cleavage opened up. Old political colleagues such as Awolowo and Tarka parted ways on this issue and engaged in verbal gymnastics in the press.

The political temperature of the nation rose over the 1973 census. Perhaps Nigeria was lucky that the military were still the key political actors. It helped to keep the lid relatively tight on the issue, apart from 'verbal wars' in the press. But essentially the issue shocked Gowon out of his naivety — his overly optimistic view of a new Nigeria with a new breed of Nigerians who had learned from the past, and who had developed a new political culture. To Gowon's surprise, echoes of the past loomed large in the political system. He was taken aback by this discovery. This came out clearly in his reactions to the behaviour of Nigerians over this issue. 'I was really surprised that people were politicizing the whole exercise. And I told Chief Awolowo that I was displeased with his politicking with the exercise. It was my belief that the initial figures registered would be reduced. All I wanted was accurate figures to help with economic planning.'

It is interesting that Gowon was surprised at the politicization of the census exercises. Census in Nigeria is a political issue. For Gowon, however, it was a technocratic exercise. He was proved wrong by the reactions of Nigerians. His assumptions which formed the basis of his 1970 speech were seriously challenged — Nigerians were very much the old Nigerians. This was the beginning of the challenge to his confidence in his plan towards civilianization! If Nigerian politicians could react in this fashion while the military were still in control, what would happen when they took over?

Yet the census exercise was one in which Yakubu Gowon could not win. Was it to be cancelled or not to be cancelled? If Gowon accepted the results, he would have displeased the Southern states. If he rejected the results and cancelled them, the Northern states would have been most unhappy with him. For Gowon, the resolution of this dilemma would have to wait for the report of *Census Data Review Committee* of the National Census Board, under the chairmanship of Mr Ukpabi Asika. Gowon's plans were that the initial figures would be reduced and he would announce the final figures to the nation on October 1, 1975.<sup>9</sup> He later found that fate did not assign him the role of making that October 1, broadcast. Perhaps interesting too on this issue was Gowon's belief that the figures were not far from the correct ones, even though he could not ascertain the nature of the breakdown by states. As he later remarked:

I was accused by my successor that the figures in the 1973 census (79.76 millions) was too high. Yet in an issue of *Nigeria Today* (*Budget Edition*) London, No. 89, April 1978, Nigeria High Commission, London, p. 34) General Obasanjo, in his budget was quoted as having said 'The reality of our situation is that with a population of well over 80 million people, judging by the number of registered voters and our present Gross National Product we must, by our per capita income, be one of the poorest nations in the world.'<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the accurate figures, the important point was that Gowon's optimism about Nigeria's political maturity gradually tapered off. While the Census Data Review Committee had an enormous task of scrutinizing about 15 million documents collected during the August 1974 post-enumeration check, the public was not constantly informed about the progress with the work. It therefore seemed to the public (and quite legitimately too) that Gowon had driven the issue under the carpet, probably waiting for a more conducive atmosphere before making further announcements on the matter. For Gowon, it was frustrating, for the Nigerian public, it was disappointing.

However, Gowon went on to deal with other issues in his political programme. The revenue allocation formula issue was another of those controversial ones.

## The New Revenue Allocation Formula

Like the census issue, the revenue allocation formula had always been a controversial issue in Nigeria. Since the Binn's Revenue Commission formula of 1964,<sup>11</sup> it had been found necessary by the military rulers who still held on to the principle of federalism (no matter how adjusted) to work out a new formula among the newly created twelve states. The division of each region's share of the Distributable Pool Account (DPA) among the new states created in that region, as provided for by Decree No. 15, 1967, *Constitution (Financial Provisions) Decree*, was thought to be too arbitrary.

Hence in 1968, the Federal Government appointed another revenue commission under the Chairmanship of Chief I.O. Dina, to review, once again, Nigeria's fiscal system. The *Dina Commission Report* was rejected by the states essentially because of its political assumptions.<sup>12</sup> Gowon did not raise dust over the issue, but quietly implemented most aspects of this report through the back door, at the appropriate time. Space constrains our dealing with this matter here.

Between 1969 and 1974, the Federal Government took a number of

actions to reduce disparities in revenues among states and between Federal Government and the states. These are summarized in Appendix A. The DPA increased its sources of revenue from two items under the Binn's Commission to six items under the *ad hoc* arrangement by the Gowon regime, for the period 1969-74. The proceeds of the DPA were shared among states on the principles of i) 50% on the basis of federal equality among states and ii) 50% on the basis of population of states. The attempt by the military regime was to gradually depoliticize the revenue allocation exercise.

However, as the states' concern for more equitable distribution of federal resources continued, so also continued the controversy over the existing revenue allocation formula. The increase in petronaira only accentuated the controversy over the revenue allocation formula. The use of the principle of derivation as a basis of distributing revenues from mining rents and royalties led to greater disparities among the states. Although the Dina Commission had recommended that states' shares of mining rents and royalties be reduced to 10%, the military's interim formula between 1969-74 fixed it at 45%.

In the context of soaring oil prices, the disparities among states became more glaring. Hence when Federal Statutory Allocations to states during the fiscal year, 1974-75 were published, there were public reactions all over the country. The Western State with a population of 9.5 million had ₦47 million (i.e. 8.03% of total allocation) while the Midwest State with a population of 2.5 million had ₦139.9 million (i.e. 23.70%) and the Rivers State comprising 1.5 million people received ₦101.1 millions (i.e. 17.13%)<sup>13</sup>. Put another way, while both the Rivers and Midwestern States, comprising 7.3% (4 million) of the country's total population, shared between themselves 40.83% (₦241.00 million) of the total allocation to the states, the ten other states which accounted for 92.7% (51.6 millions) of country's population, shared among themselves 59.17% (349.2m) of the Statutory Allocations.

There were outcries in the country in reaction to the above figures. The Western State, in particular, and the Northern states, which had exhorted the principles of derivation when cocoa and groundnuts sold very well in world markets, complained bitterly about this allocation. They argued that the necessity to emphasize the principle of need is to be found in the nature of petroleum which does not involve direct human labour of individuals as was involved in cocoa farming in the 1950s. On the other hand, the oil producing states were angry that many of the proponents of the principle of need now had strongly supported a derivation principle of revenue-sharing when it favoured them. The oil producing states complained about damage done to their roads by heavy equipment for oil exploitation, the pollution of rivers where their citizens normally fished, as well as

the destruction of farmlands in areas of oil exploitation. Hence, they argued that they needed more money to cope with these problems created by oil exploitation.

Even state military governors joined in the debate. While Brigadier Ogbemudia of the Midwestern State was prepared to accept any revenue allocation formula 'provided there is justice and consistency in the application,'<sup>14</sup> Brigadier Abba Kyari of North-Central and Col David Bamigboye of Kwara State called for a review of the existing formula.<sup>15</sup> Governors Gomwalk of Benue-Plateau and Esuene of South-Eastern States felt that the existing formula was okay but that there was a need for a more objective system.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Governor Usman Faruk of the North-Western State condemned the criticisms because it was a unanimous decision of the SMC of which these governors were part. Brigadiers Johnson of Lagos and Rotimi of the Western State called for a revenue allocation formula that would guarantee responsible and stable government in Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, it is clear that by 1974 the politics of revenue allocation only worsened an already tension-charged political atmosphere which trailed the announcement of census figures.<sup>18</sup>

It was no surprise then that the Federal Government took action to review the revenue formula in 1975. In his broadcast to the nation,<sup>19</sup> Gowon accepted that the formula which existed was inadequate for carrying out various capital projects in the new development plan. In fact, he observed that 'no state government except two will be in a position to finance even a single year's programme on the basis of projected budget surplus' under the existing formula. In view of this, the Supreme Military Council took steps to modify the formula to ensure that each state was enabled to finance at least sixty-six and two-thirds percent of its programmes from its own independent tax effort and from federally collected revenues.<sup>20</sup>

Any gaps existing after this would be closed through a combination of loans and conditional grants from Federal Government and its agencies. In addition, Gowon promised regular reviews of the revenue allocation formula, but stressed that the SMC was 'satisfied that revenue allocation should be properly conceived not as a constitutional exercise, but as a means of financing development programmes.'<sup>21</sup> Hence, plan periods as approved from time to time by the government were to be adopted as the logical time frame for review of revenue formula. The old notion of embedding percentage and fractional shares in the constitution was to be regarded 'as obsolete and therefore to be discarded.' Future revenue sharing formulæ would be incorporated 'in appropriate decrees or legislation.'

The essence of divorcing revenue formula from the constitution was perhaps an attempt by the Gowon regime to depoliticize the revenue sharing process. In 1953 and in 1964 the Western and

Eastern regions had threatened to secede over the principle of derivation as reflected in the Louis Chick and Binn's Commission formulæ respectively. Essentially Gowon's modification of the formula was in the direction of allotting more funds to the DPA so that states could have more funds available for distribution. Derivation principle for sharing oil and non-oil revenues were de-emphasized in this process. All customs and excise duties which used to go to the states on the basis of derivation were now to pass on to the states through the DPA. The Federal Government even gave up its 100% share of offshore oil revenues to the states through the DPA.

The only revenues still shared on derivation basis were mineral rents and royalties. These were reduced from 45% to 20%. In essence, derivation ceased to be an important principle of revenue allocation, except with regard to mining rents and royalties. Nigeria was perhaps lucky that the military were still political managers when these actions were taken, for under normal civilian processes, it would have generated much political heat, as our recent experience under the Second Republic amply demonstrated. It was reliably understood that Gowon had to use his conciliation skills to effect a compromise at the Supreme Military Council meeting during which this issue was extensively and hotly discussed – especially given the position taken by the military governors. A summary of the April 1, 1975 formula is shown below:

Table 1: *The April 1, 1975 Formula (announced in October, 1974)*

<i>Items (Duties)</i>	<i>Federal</i>	<i>To States By Derivation</i>	<i>DPA</i>
A. <i>Imports</i>			
1 Tobacco	—	—	100%
2 Beverages (beer, wine, spirits)	100%	—	—
3 Motor spirit and diesel	—	—	100%
4 General or unspecified (other than tobacco, motor spirit, diesel oil, liquor)	65%	—	35%
B. <i>Exports</i>			
1 Animals, birds, etc.	—	—	100%
2 Produce, hides and skins	—	—	100%

C. <i>Excise</i>			
1 Tobacco	-	-	-
2 Motor spirit	50%	-	50%
3 Diesel oil	-	-	-
4 Unspecified	-	-	-
D. <i>Mining Rents and Royalties</i>			
1 Off-shore	-	-	100%
2 On-shore	-	20%	80%

Source: *Daily Times*, October 2, 1974, pp. 7 and 16.

This table was compiled from General Gowon's broadcast, 1 October, 1974. Variations in this since that date are not reflected here.

After the Dina Commission, the Gowon regime was very hesitant about setting up any revenue commissions. Thereafter, its actions were ad hoc and pragmatic. It reacted to the financial status of both states and Federal Government with regard to their functions and programmes under the development plan. There was no doubt, however, that the formula under the Gowon regime showed greater equity in distribution of Nigeria's soaring resources than past formulae, especially with the de-emphasis of derivation principle. Gowon's fear of politicization of the revenue-sharing exercise was confirmed by the public reactions to statutory allocations in 1974. In essence, Gowon did try his best to cash his promise with regard to the introduction of a new revenue allocation formula. The formula as of April 1, 1975 was used until 1981. That he allowed debates on revenue allocation to go on demonstrated his commitment to federalism even under a military regime. Unitary systems have no problem of revenue-sharing.

It is interesting though, that since Gowon's regime was overthrown, there have been two revenue commissions. The Obasanjo regime set up the *Aboyade Revenue Panel* to provide a working paper for the Constituent Assembly to incorporate a revenue formula into the new constitution. The report of this panel was rejected as being too technical to be politically useful. The Shagari government then had to set up the *Okigbo Revenue Commission* whose report and subsequent amendments provided the basis for the current revenue-sharing. Interesting enough, it was not made a constitutional issue, but was issued through legislation — in the spirit of the Gowon broadcast of 1974.

With this brief account of Gowon's attempts at introducing a new revenue formula, we shall now turn to the issue of the creation of states which was also one of his nine-point programme announced in 1970.

## The Creation of Additional States

Gowon's dramatic act of creating twelve states in 1967 had been very effective. In a way, it was politically revolutionary. Not many people ever imagined that the Northern Region could be balkanized into six states. This was confirmed by the fact that people in the Southern states believed (many years after this exercise) that the so-called creation of six states in the North was only a political gimmick. Often, the existence of the Interim Common Services Agency (ICSA) was cited as a camouflage for an old, solid Northern Region. It was no wonder then that ICSA came under heavy attack in 1974 by the Nigerian press.<sup>22</sup>

In an ironic way, the creation of states which was aimed at removing the structural imbalance in Nigeria's federal structure soon became an 'elixir' for curing all political ills in the society. By 1974, Gowon's decision-making unit was being overloaded with a multitude of demands. One of the most persistent of these demands was the creation of additional states. The demands for additional states manifested a new wave of parochialism among Nigerians as they competed for scarce but allocatable resources in the various subnational political units.

In his broadcast of October 1, 1970, Gowon had promised to review the issue of the creation of states four years from that date. He warned Nigerians that creating more states would not satisfy all their demands. States were not supposed to be cures for all of Nigeria's political maladies. As Gowon desperately put it then, 'Honestly, we cannot push the principle of creating more states too far.' In the next four years, the need for post-war reconstruction and the instability such a state creation exercise would generate would make consideration of the issue impossible. But four years later, Gowon promised, the military would review the matter and if they were 'convinced then that it is in the national interest to create more states, the Military Government will create them before handing over to an elected government.'<sup>23</sup> He, however, warned Nigerians against 'the dangerous consequences of ethnic and clannish exclusiveness in administering our affairs.'

Here, Gowon was non-committal. He did not promise that he would create states. But eventually, he could not dodge the issue. The demands for additional states were overwhelming by 1974. Historically solid groups such as the Rivers people who had been described as 'a community of interest' by the Willink Commission soon witnessed aggressive demands for the creation of a Port Harcourt state by the non-Ijaw groups. This group claimed that 'Ijaws have already succeeded in usurping the instruments of power and the government and now exercise full, absolute and firm control over all

financial, educational, and social services institutions to the absolute detriment of their associates.<sup>24</sup> The government of Rivers State dismissed it as the work of a few people 'apparently suffering from self-induced hallucinatory delusions and disappointments.'<sup>25</sup> It is believed that Dr Obi Wali, a state Commissioner, and the Attorney-general and Commissioner for Justice (who, like Obi Wali, is an Ikwerre) resigned from their posts because of their stand on the states issue. In Benue-Plateau State, there were demands for a Plateau<sup>26</sup> and a Benue state.<sup>27</sup>

A very interesting case was the demand for states creation from seemingly ethnically homogeneous units. In the former East-Central State, there was a demand for a Wawa (Enugu) State. While 'Wawa' was originally a perjorative term used to refer to a backward Ibo group, it became a politically functional and acceptable term for purposes of state agitation. In their petition, the proponents of the Wawa State claimed that among Ibos East of the Niger 'there are two ethnic groupings - the Southern or the Forest Ibos, and the Grassland or Northern Ibos.'<sup>28</sup> They also claimed that while they spoke the same language, 'their dialects are poles apart.' They alleged discrimination in resource allocation by Southern Ibos.

In the Western State, there were demands for Oshun, Oyo, Ogun and Ondo states. Some of these demands contained very negative descriptions of other Yoruba groups.<sup>29</sup> The South-Eastern State had its share of demands - for a Cross-Rivers State.<sup>30</sup> In the Midwest State, the Western Ijaws expressed a desire to be regrouped with their kinsmen in Rivers state. Similarly, some Ika Ibos requested to join their 'brothers' in Onitsha in East-Central State. The North-Central State witnessed very aggressive demands for a Zaria State - a protest against perceived Katsina domination.<sup>31</sup> Demands for a Borno and a Bauchi State emerged from the North-Eastern State, Igalas pressed to join Benue-Plateau State. Only in Lagos and Kano States were there no demands for a new state or boundary adjustment.

By mid-1974, eminent Nigerians in and out of government had also begun to comment on the states issue. Nnamdi Azikiwe in his lecture at the University of Nsukka, proposed twenty-two states,<sup>32</sup> while at Ahmadu Bello University, Chief Anthony Enahoro, then Federal Commissioner for Information and Labour, suggested twenty states, ten in the North and ten in the South.<sup>33</sup> Even a bishop, in a Whit Sunday sermon, suggested that Nigeria should have more states. Bishop Segun saw it as 'one sure way of eliminating occasional agitations and tensions in the country.'<sup>34</sup>

Reactions to these demands varied from one government to the other. In the East-Central State, for example, the Administrator of the East-Central State, Mr Ukpabi Asika, described the agitators in a

## Eradication of Corruption:

In his broadcast of 1970, Gowon had expressed his displeasure with public officers who enriched themselves through abuse of office. He then promised that:

New measures will be introduced to make those found guilty of corruption disgorge their ill-gotten gains. Special tribunals will be set up to deal speedily with corruption in all organs of public service and our society generally. The war against corruption is a continuing process and the military government must set a new pattern in combating this evil before return to civilian rule.<sup>42</sup>

Many Nigerians believe that Gowon did not enrich himself through abuse of office. Some of the military officers who overthrew his government in 1975 confirmed this impression. But his lieutenants evidently wallowed in the vortex of corruption. Agreed, that with the benefits of hindsight, it is now difficult to tell which regime was more corrupt - Gowon's for nine years or Murtala/Obasanjo's which lasted four years. This author believes that in comparative terms and in the amount of money siphoned from public treasury, the Obasanjo regime was probably much more corrupt than the Gowon regime (and the scandals in newspapers tend to confirm this).

However, under the Gowon regime, many of his lieutenants (military and civilian) enriched themselves at the public expense. This detracted from the seriousness of Gowon's promise that he would 'eradicate' corruption. In the first place, the Gowon regime as a transitional regime, could not have *eradicated* corruption. Corruption is a perennial issue in all nation-states. More often, it is more realistic to talk about reducing the magnitude of corruption. If Gowon was out to eradicate corruption, then he had set for himself an impossible task. However, in fairness to him, Gowon realised that 'the war against corruption is a continuing process' and what his regime was to do was to 'set a new pattern in combating this evil before the return to civilian rule.'

The nation saw his lieutenants display conspicuous consumption amidst abject poverty of the masses. People were naturally incensed and some Nigerians decided to drive the issue home to Gowon by making allegations against some of his lieutenants. The motives for some of those allegations varied - from sincere indignation to cheap political scores and to revenge. A look at this new dilemma for Gowon will provide an insight into Gowon's reasons for taking the *final* decision he took about return to civil rule. We shall take a few cases to illustrate this national malaise - corruption.

The first public challenge in this area came in about March 1974

when a business woman, Miss Iyabo Olorunkoya was arrested in London and was taken to court on charges of hemp trafficking. In her defence, Iyabo implicated two top military officers – Brigadier Funso Sotomi and Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle. Iyabo alleged that Sotomi was her boy-friend and that she had passed through London to Italy to meet him. The other ticket in her bag she claimed, belonged to Mrs Risi Adesanya Adekunle, the wife of Brigadier Adekunle. Briefly, it was alleged that Iyabo did not pass through regular customs processes at Ikeja airport in Lagos. She was said to have been driven in a military car straight to the VIP lounge where she had drinks before her departure.

Brigadier Sotomi denied the allegations and declared that Iyabo was not his girl-friend. Similarly, Brigadier Adekunle denied that Mrs Risi Adesanya Adekunle was his wife. Whatever the truth was, the press played this issue up. It was all the more embarrassing to Gowon because the names of his two top military officers were mentioned in corrupt deals at London courts. The two officers were suspended, pending investigations.<sup>43</sup> Gowon, though reluctant to let these very good army officers go, was pressurized by his military colleagues to show them the way out of the barracks.

With a very restive atmosphere in the country by 1974, Gowon found that there were more embarrassing revelations in stock for him. On July 8, 1974, a Lagos-based business executive, Mr Godwin Daboh wrote a letter to Mr J.S. Tarka, then Federal Commissioner for Communications, accusing him of abuse of office and corruption. Two days later, Mr Daboh wrote another letter to him alleging further wrong-doings. On July 13, Mr Daboh swore to an affidavit at Lagos High Court affirming all the allegations of wrong-doings against Tarka.

Among these allegations of wrong-doing, was that Tarka owned and operated a coded Swiss bank account with the Swiss Volks-Bank Limited in Geneva; that he caused to be incorporated 'The Nigeria Investment Quest Limited', with his wife, Mrs Francisca Tarka as a director, and his private secretary, Mr S. Ikowe as its Managing Director. Mr Daboh alleged that this company had close trade links with the Ministry of Communications of which Mr J.S. Tarka was Commissioner.<sup>44</sup>

The press again picked this up and demanded that Tarka resign or be sacked. Allusions were even made to the case of the two brigadiers by the Press. The Press wondered why the two brigadiers were sacked from office while Tarka was being allowed by Gowon to hang on to his job.<sup>45</sup> There were many who believed that Mr J.S. Tarka should have resigned on his own. Yet many other Nigerians believed that the Press was constituting itself into prosecution, judge and jury, and that they were being unfair to Tarka by finding him guilty before

which Admiral Wey and General Hassan also read.<sup>60</sup> Then on his way to China on a state visit Gowon announced at the airport: 'I am now satisfied, after listening to explanations and having had time to check all the relevant references as provided by Mr Gomwalk, that he has not been guilty of any wrong-doings as alleged by Mr Aku in his affidavit.'<sup>61</sup> In view of the public interest in the matter, Gomwalk was authorized by the FMG to release his detailed explanation. Gowon then reaffirmed his confidence in his military governor.

In addition, the Head of State reiterated his government's determination to rid Nigeria of corruption but he warned that a situation in which 'highly respected national institutions such as our law courts and the press are used as instruments of blackmail against highly placed public officials with a view of damaging their image and discrediting the military regime will no longer be tolerated.'<sup>62</sup>

Many Nigerians were very dissatisfied with Gowon's statement. Students demonstrated, the press barked loud and clear their disenchantment, and even some military officers<sup>63</sup> expressed contrary views on this issue of corruption. Amidst tension, Gowon returned from China and announced: 'I am ready to go to battle for the country's survival.'

He warned that if the intention of the affidavits was to get 'at the man at the top' he was ready to do battle with whoever was involved. He opined that it had become clear that some despicable characters in the country were aiming at the man at the top by damaging the images of his lieutenants. Exasperated with the situation, Gowon added that 'only God can save us at the rate we are going.'<sup>64</sup> He regretted that his intention to wipe out corruption was being thwarted by the methods people adopted in handling this matter.

Incidentally, Gomwalk's case was not the only one. This author reliably learnt that affidavits were to be sworn against Lt-Commander Diete-Spiff of Rivers State, Ukpabi Asika of East-Central State and a host of others.<sup>65</sup> Some of these proposed affidavits were being supported by some military officers who wanted to use these affidavits to convince Gowon of the need to change the governors. There was no doubt that most of these governors were corrupt.

But why did Gowon clear Gomwalk's name so quickly? Gowon had been accused of rushing the issue through because it involved his friend and 'brother'. Others wondered why Tarka's case lasted weeks while that of Gomwalk was disposed of within seven days.<sup>66</sup> Many Nigerians were displeased with Gowon's action in clearing Gomwalk. How did Gowon see the issue? Below is Gowon's reaction to this issue in an interview with the author:

It is unfortunate that the pressures from various people led to his death. When I learned about the allegations against him, I called him and asked him to explain himself. I was really angry with him.

He then wrote a lengthy report explaining himself. You can ask General Hassan and Admiral Wey. They saw Gomwalk's statement of defence. In the circumstances, what else could one have done when Aper Aku's affidavit contained exaggerations and half-truths. It is interesting that people accuse me of 'clearing' Joseph Gomwalk because he was my 'brother'. But these same people forgot that I also cleared General Ejoor some years earlier when he resurfaced after the liberation of the Midwest. Was Ejoor my brother? I was only trying to be fair because when you are in power, you can hurt many people and not all allegations brought against you may be correct. I always asked for proof of an allegation. A leader cannot govern on the basis of rumours.

To be fair to Gowon, it was most unlikely that he cleared Gomwalk of the allegations because of any special relations the latter had with him. Gowon's conviction about justice and fairness would not have allowed him to do so. There was no doubt that he believed very strongly in proof of allegations. Even members of his family and his associates in government blamed Gowon's downfall on his stubbornness and constant demands for proofs which later dissuaded people from giving him some vital information.

Having seen Gomwalk's statement and made those references Gomwalk quoted, Gowon, in his usual credulous belief in innate human goodness (in the absence of proof), probably thought it was best to clear his lieutenant. But in doing so, Gowon only confirmed the allegation that he was merely paying lip service to his enunciated crusade against corruption. Perhaps it would have been more politically advisable for Gowon to have set up a panel headed by a respectable high court judge to probe the allegations. Both Gomwalk and Aku would have had an opportunity to state their cases. As it was Aku did not have a chance and the populace were not convinced that Gomwalk was innocent of the allegations. Subsequent probes into these matters by the Murtala Mohammed regime actually found Gomwalk guilty of corruption.<sup>67</sup> It could be argued that Gowon had learnt from Tarka's case the political cost of procrastination in these matters, and had decided to make his stand clear on the case very quickly.

Could it be that Gowon's judgement was tintured not by nepotistic instincts but by the pressures of the Nigerian polity on him at that particular point in time? This was probably so. In the first place, Mr Joseph Tarka, the vilified Commissioner for Communications hailed from Benue-Plateau State. Dechi Gomwalk came from the same state. While Gowon was more of a Wusasa (Zaria) man, he was seen through the usual perceptual prism that Nigerians viewed their leaders as a Benue-Plateau State man.

It was reliably learnt that some of Gowon's colleagues, especially

some of the governors, pointed out to him that the whole affidavit exercise was an attempt to get at him by causing instability in his home state. The view also holds that if crisis started from Gowon's state, then no one external to that state could be accused of Gowon's downfall. It was therefore believed by some that the crisis in Benue-Plateau State was being hatched by non-indigenes of the state.<sup>68</sup>

This, perhaps, explains Gowon's belief that attempts were being made to get at him through discrediting his lieutenants and, therefore, his government. This belief probably clouded Gowon's otherwise cool-headed judgement. In addition, it may be important to point out one of Gowon's traits - that of belief in the innate goodness of human beings. Once he believes one is good, it takes overwhelming evidence against that one to change Gowon's opinion of him. This author believes that in judging Gowon's decisions on this issue the above factors are pertinent.

Whatever it was, the handling of the Gomwalk and Aku cases eroded appreciably Gowon's credibility as a leader. In an ironic historical coincidence, the same Aku who rose to fame on the wave-length of affidavits became the Governor of Benue State in 1979. In August 1982 (the same month in which he swore the affidavit against Gomwalk) he was accused by Mr S.J.I. Akure of having corruptly accumulated ₦16.5 million in foreign and local banks among many other allegations of wrong-doing. While Gomwalk made public rebuttal of Aku's 26 point allegation, Aku has not done so as per Akure's allegations.<sup>69</sup>

Essentially, these two issues of corruption and reactions to them confirmed Gowon's opinion (derived from the census and revenue allocation issues) that Nigerians were basically the same old 'Burbons' who had learnt nothing from the past. But more important was this new feeling, given certain evidence, that people were out to get him.

Even within the military, there were rumblings of discontent. Rumours of coups had saturated the political atmosphere on two crucial dates, each year, after 1966. Every January 15 and July 29 was preceded by rumours about coup plots. Anxiety graphs would only show a decline after these dates came and passed. Let us then discuss Gowon's promise of reorganization of the armed forces.

## Reorganization of the Armed Forces

Gowon had promised a reorganization of the armed forces, at the end of the war. There was no doubt that the ramshackle army Gowon had inherited in August 1966, had drastically changed by 1975. From an almost disintegrated army, Gowon was able to put together an

army that was able to fight and maintain the country's territorial integrity. A nicknamed army of 'Northern troops' was transformed into a Nigerian Army.

After the Civil War, the Nigerian Armed Forces faced new challenges. There was the population of the Nigerian Army, in particular. This force had risen from less than seven thousand in August 1966 to about 200,000 in 1970. Under normal circumstances Gowon was supposed to have demobilized all those conscripted on an emergency basis for Civil War purposes. This was not done within the first four years after the war.

In fairness to Gowon, it is common knowledge that demobilization of the armed forces is one of the most ticklish issues following a Civil War. As was later demonstrated, the abortive coup which led to General Mohammed's death was partly motivated by the declared intention of the government to demobilize the army.

In a way, demobilization of soldiers who had offered to sacrifice their lives for the nation could be painful, especially if there was nothing which they could be redeployed to do. The wave of armed robbery after the war had frightened Gowon. He believed that releasing so many ex-soldiers into the society would heighten the feeling of social insecurity which trailed the Civil War. Guns were everywhere and lives were threatened in broad daylight. In fact, Gowon had to set up Armed Robbery Tribunals to deal summarily with armed robbers. It is to Gowon's credit that he never, once, ordered for critics or opponents to be shot. The only public executions during his rule were of convicted armed robbers.

However, given Gowon's fears as they were, the fact still remained that in peacetime a large army such as Nigeria's, was a drain on the nation's purse. In peacetime such a large army expended most of its budget on personnel emoluments at the expense of improvement in weapons or fire-power. The choice for Gowon was one of either demobilizing and facing the possible consequences or leave the army as it was and avoid social upheavals, but with greater chances of not improving its war preparedness.

After leaving this issue 'under the carpet' for a while, Gowon seemed to have opted for the latter. It seemed that for Gowon what was important was to leave the army as it was, while effecting piecemeal internal structural reorganizations for purposes of more effective control. Unfortunately, many of his officers believed that while Major-General Hassan had done a pretty good job as Chief of Army Staff, his successor, Major-General David Ejoor did not help the situation by his lax attitude to the issue of army reorganization.

Many soldiers became angry with being quartered in 'bashes'<sup>70</sup> four years after the Civil War. Gowon was aware of their hardship and empathized with them. But the soldiers needed more than empathy.

While contracts for the building of army barracks had been given out, soldiers were unhappy with the slow progress made towards their completion. At times contractors colluded with military officers to make cheap money out of the Ministry of Defence. Commanders and some strategically placed military officers enriched themselves to the chagrin of the average soldier who still lived in 'bashes'. Corruption within the officer corp of the armed forces was not hidden. The Pay and Records section saw to it that there were inflated lists of non-existent soldiers who got their packet every month. The Supply and Transport section of the army was nicknamed by soldiers 'Supply and Thief'.

Increasingly, as Gowon settled to issues of state governance after the war, his contacts with his military colleagues gradually decreased. Many military officers did not like this. There were rumours about how Gowon used to have lunch once a week with some military officers, to keep him in touch with military affairs. Many officers complained that gradually such luncheons decreased in frequency, and disappeared from Gowon's schedule altogether sometime after his wedding.

It may be pertinent to note that in crisis situations the contact between the Head of State (civilian or military) and his aides or colleagues is usually more intense. Under normal conditions such contacts are reduced to routine processes. It may not be fair to accuse Gowon of lack of constant contact with his colleagues. Yet this is not the same as the issue of Gowon becoming inaccessible. Many military officers, including Major-General Jemibewon<sup>71</sup> and General Mohammed<sup>72</sup> had accused Gowon of rendering himself inaccessible to members of the armed forces who had important information and/or advice to give him.

Again, as in all situations such as these, it is not always clear whether Gowon made himself inaccessible or whether over zealous aides (at times, with self-interest) prevented certain individuals and important information from reaching the boss. One thing was clear though; that the aides built a 'citadel' around Gowon, especially as the political temperature rose. But it is not clear what sort of information filtered to Gowon and who saw him.

Perhaps one of the most glaring symptoms of strains on Gowon's capability, was his inability to keep that balance between the military and civilian sectors which had earlier on marked him out as a good reconciliation leader. As pressures mounted for decisions on crucial political issues, as socio-political problems multiplied and weighed down on the 'creature of crisis', his ability to reconcile the political and military sectors showed evident strains. The civilian problems ensured that he had to pay attention to details and take decisions. Yet, his essential constituency was in the barracks.

Thus, as socio-political problems bogged Gowon down, his military constituency suffered. His aides in the military at the supreme military headquarters who had access to him did not help him feel the correct pulse of the barracks. Gowon's gradual loss of grip on affairs in the barracks was one of the factors which led to the end of the reconciliation leader's hold on the political system. Nor did the many foreign trips (which obviously boosted Nigeria's image abroad) help him politically at home. It meant, that he had less time for 'details' of events in the barracks and in the larger political arena. The burden and the frustrations for Gowon must have been great, especially when one considers the issue of demilitarization of the polity.

## Gowon's 1976 Date With Politics

In his 1970 broadcast General Gowon promised that:

When we shall have reorganized our armed forces, prepared a new constitution, conducted a new census, purged the country of corrupt and unpatriotic elements and fulfilled the other tasks already mentioned, it will remain the duty of the Military Government to organize free and fair elections in order to hand over the country to properly elected governments.<sup>73</sup>

That duty should have been embarked upon as the target date drew near, even though it was conditional on the issues mentioned in the above quotation. Obviously the purging of the nation of 'corrupt and unpatriotic elements' is a life-long project and a transitional government, such as a military regime, was incapable of meeting such promises.

By 1973 it was clear that Nigerians had begun to clamour for the lifting of the ban on party politics. In his reaction to the possibility of lifting the ban on politics, Gowon cautioned Nigerians about being too hasty over the issue. Answering reporters' questions at Enugu Airport on his way to Lagos from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in December 1973, Gowon said, 'I will not allow anything that will interfere with our present development plan, peace and stability.' He emphasized that to 'lift the ban now on politics is to allow for a political football where people will like to score a goal.'<sup>74</sup>

However, Gowon gave an indication that the ban on party politics would be removed with effect from October 1974.<sup>75</sup> Thus far Gowon was still committed to his promise of a 1976 date for demilitarization of the Nigerian polity. In fact, by 1974, some of his cabinet members openly commented on the issue. Chief Anthony Enahoro, the Federal Commissioner for Information and Labour had questioned the logic of retaining emergency regulations of 1967.<sup>76</sup> Alhaji Aminu Kano, the Federal Commissioner for Health, in his lecture at the

London School of Economics and Politics on 'Nigeria after Military Inter-regnum', advised that it was 'time to talk politics' in order to achieve good planning.<sup>77</sup>

It is to Gowon's credit that members of his government spoke out their minds on national issues — at times contradicting his own position on these issues. Few military governments or leaders would have tolerated such discordant notes from some of their members. But Gowon believed in criticism and freedom of expression by his colleagues in order to reach optimum decisions. While this was often seen as a sign of Gowon's weakness, there were some advantages to it, given Nigeria's peculiar setting. While Nigeria's press would cry 'hell' about police harrassment, the freedom they enjoyed under the military was unparalleled even under other, seemingly democratic, regimes in Africa.

The important point, however, was that Nigerians were expecting arrangements towards demilitarization to have begun by 1974. In fact, Gowon had ordered 'all state military governors to compile reports on 'The Achievement of Military Rule since 1966'. Many state governments had embarked on such reports by June 1974.

Meanwhile a number of events were taking place in the country. Gowon was convinced that graduating university students should offer a period of National Service to the nation. He introduced the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme, to commence with 1973 graduates. For students who had demonstrated at different times against the policies of the Gowon regime, this was seen as an attempt to punish them. The Federal Government saw it differently. The result was a student crisis which drew immediate attention from and action by the Federal Government.

Perhaps those who believe that Gowon was indecisive never knew that once convinced about the value of NYSC, Gowon put his foot down, despite opposition from within the military and his cabinet over the commencement of this programme. Today the NYSC scheme is seen by Nigerians as a useful device for nation-building. Unpopular as it was, Gowon is now vindicated. Yet it must be mentioned that some who were opposed to this issue were genuinely reacting to the plans for implementation and the timing. The crisis which followed implementation of the NYSC scheme demonstrated to Gowon that some politicians were behind the actions of students.

It was, therefore, not surprising that when university academic staff went on strike, the Federal Government lost no time in successfully bullying them to submission by threatening to sack all those who did not return to work. Again student demonstrations over issues of corruption in the country and over the allegedly inflated salaries of the military, convinced Gowon that some impatient politicians were using students.

It is not clear at what point Gowon changed his mind about the 1976 deadline. In some states commissioners were being asked to declare their assets and prepare to quit their offices.<sup>78</sup> In September, the Federal Commissioner for Works and Housing, Alhaji Femi Okunnu, indicated that all Federal Civil Commissioners were expected to go on October 20th after declaring their assets.<sup>79</sup> It was even rumoured that all the military governors were to be reassigned in October 1974.

The year 1974 was also marked by debates over whether or not the military should hand over power to civilians in 1976. Notable among these was Brigadier Osaigbovo Ogbemudia's lecture on 'Leadership and followership in Nigeria' to the Committee of Progressive Gentlemen at the Premier Hotel, Ibadan, in March 1974. In his lecture, Ogbemudia argued that for the Nigerian masses it was the ability to 'deliver the goods' which mattered and not who led them; 'whether the man in green khaki or in agbada'.<sup>80</sup> He advocated the 'primacy of our economy' rather than the primacy of politics.

Other notable political figures such as Nnamdi Azikiwe suggested a five year period of Civilian-Military dyarchy. Yet there were others who were decidedly on the side of demilitarization. But as the then Vice-Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Professor I.S. Audu, told the soldiers of the Third Infantry Division, Port Harcourt, on April 1, 1974.

The legitimacy of the present military rule is based largely on its integrity and honour. It has given its word of honour that it would hand over power. If it doesn't it would erode that legitimacy so seriously as to compromise its right to give honourable leadership to the country.<sup>81</sup>

Restive as the public was, Gowon felt the need to consult his senior military officers on the issue. Many military officers supported the idea of the military keeping its word to return to the barracks in 1976. Yet at the same time many senior military officers (including some who later paraded themselves as champions of a return to barracks in 1976) advised Gowon to hang on to power for a while until the tensions of 1973-74 had subsided appreciably. Among the civilians, many were in support of the 1976 deadline, especially given the attitudes of some of Gowon's military governors. Yet there were some who were very apprehensive of 1976, given the resurgence of geoethnic and other forms of politics in Nigeria.

On October 1, 1974, Gowon made his much awaited broadcast to the nation. In his broadcast on the fourteenth anniversary of the country's independence, General Gowon announced a number of important decisions of the Supreme Military Council.

established called, *Federal and State Advisory Councils* (with members drawn from all walks of life) to give Nigerians greater participation in government.<sup>84</sup> Gowon then committed himself to the creation of additional states and promised a review of the constitution. In addition, the final census figures were to be released, while firm measures were promised against proven cases of corruption. All military detainees, especially those who were involved in the January 1966 coup and the Midwest invasion of 1967, were released.<sup>85</sup>

For many Nigerians, the broadcast shattered their hopes - not so much because of the announcement of a breach of Gowon's promise for a return to civilian rule, as much as other aspects. The politicians who had ambitions were obviously disappointed that 1976 was found politically unrealistic after all. But most other Nigerians were disappointed that the military governors who had gradually eroded Gowon's credibility in the states were to stay till March 31st, 1975. So also were some military men, especially those who nursed ambitions of being appointed military governors themselves.

For others, Gowon's promise of action against proven cases of corruption was not credible, given the immediate past. Yet there were Nigerians who actually felt disappointed that no new states were created on that day. For many Nigerians October 1, 1974 held many expectations and Gowon's credibility was linked to these expectations. Obviously, there was no way any Head of State could have met *all* the expectations, but the crisis of expectations did create a credibility crisis for the military government, especially after the broadcast.

This author has no doubt at all that given the situation of the country between 1973 and 1974, Gowon was *very sincere* in his own assessment of the situation. Some of his advisers (military and civilian) might not have been very sincere with him, for some of them should have felt the pulse of the nation and advised Gowon that, after eight years of military rule, the prospect of taking the lid off the political pot would normally lead to general excitement among many politically active groups. This in no way ignores some of the negative echoes of the past which had started to resound very loudly in the political system.

Like Ogbemudia, Gowon believed in 'the primacy of economy' over politics. As he observed in his broadcast; 'What the country and the ordinary citizen want is peace and stability - the only conditions under which progress and development are possible.' Gowon wanted an atmosphere which would suit the implementation of his new development plan. More than any military ruler, Gowon was most concerned about the nation's economy and its development. He was also lucky that the oil boom period coincided with his regime. His sincerity in attempting to make Nigeria an economic 'giant' was not in doubt.

Unfortunately, the refraction of Gowon's perceptual prism distorted his accurate perception of the real situation. While the ordinary citizens did not care who ruled them, military or civilian, as long as they were provided with water, electricity, education, health services, food, good roads and other services, the elites cared very much. The political class which had been ousted in 1966 were waiting on the flanks. New and articulate members had joined this elite group with aspirations for active political participation. So while Gowon exhorted the 'primacy of economy' many members of the elites pressed for the 'primacy of politics'. More than the average citizen, the elites were the most vocal and effective in wielding influence – whether these elites were in the erstwhile political class, the military, the bureaucracy, business or in the four walls of universities (including students).

This miscalculation is important because it alienated those who would normally have been mobilized by the regime. Nigerian elites were more politicized than Gowon had imagined. Their attachment to improving the economy was less than their demands for political participation. In fact as Aminu Kano even argued in 1974, 'if your economic planning is not influenced by your political thinking, you are bound to make a mess of it.'<sup>86</sup> The argument, therefore, is for politics and economics to operate concurrently.

Yet one cannot but appreciate the difficulties Gowon had, based on his initial assumptions. He was taken aback by the resurgence of Nigeria's old brand of geoethnic politics. In a way it manifested his political naiveté as well as his innocence. He should have realised that these traits do not die off automatically. They persist over time and wilt away very gradually.

Having made up its mind that there would be no going back to politics in 1976, the Supreme Military Council did not need immediately to consider three issues of the nine-point programme. These were, i) the preparation and adoption of a new constitution, ii) organization of genuinely national political parties, and iii) the organization of elections, and installation of popularly elected governments in states and at the centre. But the Head of State painfully emphasized that the military regime had not abandoned the idea of a return to civilian rule. This got drowned in the emotional atmosphere of the period. Those Nigerians who picked it up saw it as a ploy for an indefinite rule by Gowon.

Gowon's reaction to this is important in our understanding of the working of his mind in this regard and an excerpt of the author's interview with him is quoted below:

Gowon: I had given my word that I was going to return the country to civilian rule. I can assure you that that has

never wavered and I meant every word of it. Now this was the honest truth no matter what any other person might have said. You could probably accuse me that I was not fast enough. But I wanted to make sure that when it was done there would be no temptation for military boys to say 'alright we want also to have a go, we want to take over, we can do better', because I know that coups and counter-coups only generate instability in a nation . . .

Elaigwu: One accusation is that you and a number of your colleagues wanted to hand over and become politicians . . . so that you could go on in government. How would you react to this?

Gowon: If there were some people who thought that way, that is some of my colleagues, it was not to my knowledge. But you know I can only speak for myself. I had hoped that when I finished . . . I would be able to organize a proper election and whoever came top in a free and fair election, that would be the person one would support and encourage the nation to support so that the country could enter freely into a new phase of political development. Honestly, I must admit there were suggestion that I should do a Nasser-type thing, from mainly civilians - some civil servants and erstwhile politicians - a lot of people who thought that, at least, one had got, after so many years, requisite qualifications to be able to get on in politics. But I can assure you it had no attraction for me . . . Look! I can tell you this. Honestly, if I was interested I know exactly what I would have done to be in power for as long as I wanted.

Elaigwu: For example?

Gowon: I would have organized or manipulated things in my favour . . .

Elaigwu: Like Mobutu?

Gowon: Well, Mobutu, no. I would probably have had my own style. At least one would have been able to start organizing something which would probably form a party later on which one would fall back on for one's own political campaign, as one's political platform. But certainly that was not my interest. Otherwise, certainly, I would have been able to make it. Again, the other thing is that one would have been able to make sure that none of one's opponents survived to be able to cause a threat to you. That is not my approach to

government or the sort of government I wanted to bequeath to future generations of Nigerians. I certainly would have liked to see a government that would have been able to tolerate opposition and opponents, and think of opposition as a healthy thing and probably it might highlight some of the new things that the government (if it is responsible) should have done and be able to look into it and find a solution better than what the opposition had been able to present.<sup>87</sup>

There is hardly any hard evidence that Gowon and his colleagues were planning to stay indefinitely in office. But those who had been patiently waiting and had been tolerating a number of things happening at state and federal levels saw 1976 as a threshold. It was no longer to be. From then on, the pressure on the Gowon regime became greater. A soldier-statesman who hardly ever broke his promises during Nigeria's years of crises, found himself renegeing on his promise because of socio-political developments he observed clearly getting out of his control. The period after October 1, 1974 saw many more pressures and more frustrations for Gowon. The capability of the reconciliation leader was constantly being called into display, at times, in most difficult circumstances in a political environment in which many members of elite groups had become more hostile, and some issues transcended immediate short-term solutions. The credibility and capability of the government was frequently challenged and strains appeared increasingly more manifest in the leadership. Subsequent events were to pull the curtains down on Gowon's administration. What issues immediately led to the curtain fall and how did the curtains fall?

## Notes

- 1 Interview with General Gowon, August 14, 1978
- 2 *New Nigerian*, 23 November, 1973. p. 1
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Sunday Times*, November 25, 1973. p. 24
- 5 *The Nigerian Standard*, May 11, 1974. p. 1
- 6 *Ibid.* All figures are in millions.
- 7 See a very valuable analysis in Nelson Kasfir, 'Soldiers as Policymakers in Nigeria: The Comparative Performance of Four Military Regimes'. *West Africa Series* Vol. XVII, No. 3 (Nigeria) p. 11. See below Kasfir's interesting comparison of census figures; 1963 and 1973:

STATE	1973	1963	% INCREASE
North-Eastern	15.38	7.79	+ 97.4
Kano	10.90	5.77	+ 88.9
Western	8.92	9.49	- 6.0
North-Western	8.50	5.73	+ 48.3
East-Central	8.06	7.23	+ 10.3
Benue-Plateau	5.17	4.01	+ 28.9
North-Central	6.79	4.10	+ 65.6
Kwara	4.64	2.40	+ 93.3
South-Eastern	3.46	3.62	- 4.4
Midwest	3.24	2.54	+ 27.6
Lagos	2.47	1.44	+ 71.5*
Rivers	2.23	1.54	+ 44.8

\* Some districts in Western State had been shifted to Lagos State.

8 Interview, Gowon.

9 In his October 1, 1974 broadcast Gowon promised that the census figures would be thoroughly scrutinized. He said that the set of criteria would be applied 'constantly and uniformly to the data collected during the head count and the post-enumeration check exercise carried out last August' Gowon revealed the gigantic work of the Committee which was faced with over 15 million documents and hinted that the figures might not be in before the end of 1974. (*New Nigerian*, October 3, 1974, p. 24)

10 Interview, Gowon.

11 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Report of the Fiscal Review Commission* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, Printing Division, 1964)

12 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Report of the Interim Revenue Allocation Review Committee* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1968)

The Chairman of the panel was Chief I.O. Dina. Other members included: Professor Aboyade, Mr A.E. Ekukinam, Mr Ibrahim Tahir, Mr P.O.A. Dada, Mr F.M.C. Obi, Mr Ahmed Talib, Professor T.M. Yusufu, and Mr D.O. Ogunyemi.

13 See *New Nigerian*, 10 April, 1974

14 *The Nigerian Observer*, 4 May, 1974, p. 1

15 Col Abba Kyari said.

Each government should be assured of [a] definite share of the national revenue to carry out the much needed development in its own fields . . . And when any funds are shared they should be distributed to each state government as of right and not as charity. After all the thirteen governments of the federation are autonomous and none is subordinate to any others, in their own spheres.

North-Central State, *Governor Abba Kyari Answers Radio Television Questions* (Kaduna: Government Printer, 1970) p. 12

Also, see D. Bamigboye. *Nigerian Herald*, 23 May 1974, p. 1

16 *Daily Times*, 14 May, 1974, p. 31

17 Brigadier Johnson of Lagos in *The Nigerian Observer*, 25 May, 1974, pp. 1 and 3. Brigadier Rotimi, in *The New Nigerian*, 27 June 1974, p. 10

18 Note that following reactions, the Federal Commissioner for Finance, Alhaji Shehu Shagari had described the *ad hoc* formula between 1969-74 as temporary, even though it had lasted five years. In January 1974, Alhaji Shehu Shagari announced that this formula 'would be reviewed by the proposed allocation

- commission' after which the 50% equality and 50% population basis of sharing the DPA 'would then cease to exist' *The Nigerian Observer*, 21 January 1974 p. 1
- 19 General Gowon, Broadcast to the Nation by The Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, in *Daily Times*, 2 October 1974.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 7
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 The presence of ICOSA had been sharply criticized by many Nigerians, particularly in the South, who feared that this agency not only questioned the validity of the creation of states in the former Northern Region, but also might be used as a platform for a solitary Northern alliance against the South, thus rejuvenating the old problem of domination by the North. (Ironically, there was no similar reaction to the Eastern States Interim Assets and Liabilities Agency - ESIALA - except from the Workers Union of East Central State). Hence, when Governor Audu Bako of Kano State was reported to have said that the idea of disbanding ICOSA was like 'dividing the indivisible', many Nigerian newspapers attacked the Governor's statement, (see *Daily Times*, 8 June, 1974 p. 1) and many Nigerians from the South criticized the existence of ICOSA. Coming soon after the provisional census figures were announced, this was understandable. The Governor, however denied the allegation (see *Sunday Times*, 23 June, 1974, p. 1) Ironically, the so-called solid North manifested greater political revolution and national outlook in the 1979 general elections. The results show that only in the Northern States did all political parties make appreciable impacts and four political parties controlled governments in this area. This is obvious when compared with the performance of the UPN in old Western State and the NPP in Ibo areas of the old Eastern States
- 23 General Gowon, 'Broadcast to the Nation, October 1, 1970', loc. cit., p. 6
- 24 *Nigerian Tide* (Port Harcourt), 14 September 1974; *Daily Times*, 20 September, 1974; *Daily Times*, 14 November 1974 and 7 January 1975, p. 16
- 25 *Daily Times*, 16 January, 1975, pp. 15-18 'Rivers State Government Statement on the Demand for the creation of a Port Harcourt State'
- 26 See Mr E. Isandu's Press Conference June 24, 1974. (mimeograph), pp. 2-3 and also his letter to the Head of State dated 13 June 1974 (unpublished) titled 'Our Stand For A Plateau State'
- 27 See open letter to the Head of State by some Idoma people. *New Nigerian*, 21 November 1974, p. 14
- 28 *Daily Times*, 23 April 1974, p. 21, *New Nigerian*, 15 April 1971, pp. 6 and 7
- 29 See demand for a Central Yoruba State on 28 June, 1974 Also see Azikiwe's lecture, *Sunday Times*, 19 May 1974, p. 8
- 30 'The Proposed Cross-River State of Nigeria. Case No. 4', *Sunday Times*, 30 June, 1974, p. 10
- 31 *Daily Times*, 28 June 1974, p. 5 and *New Nigerian*, 1 July 1974, p. 9
- 32 *Daily Times*, May 19, 1974, p. 9
- 33 Enahoro's lecture, 'Creation of More States in Nigeria: The next step', (Mimeograph) 29 pages, 26 September, 1974.
- 34 *Daily Times*, June 3, 1974, p. 1
- 35 *Sunday Times*, 19 May 1974, p. 1
- 36 *Daily Times*, June 28, 1974, p. 5
- 37 *New Nigerian*, 1 July 1974, p. 9
- 38 *Daily Times*, 1 January 1975, p. 8
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *The Nigerian Standard*, October 6, 1974, p. 1
- 41 Interview: Gowon
- 42 *Unity, Stability and Progress*, loc. cit., p. 5
- 43 *Sunday Times*, March 17, 1974 p. 1
- 44 See among others, *Sunday Times*, July 28, 1974, p. 1

- 45 See Gomwalk's defence of Federal Government action, *New Nigerian*, August 8, 1974, p. 1 - Gomwalk said: 'If the memories of Nigerians are not so short, the names of the two officers were mentioned at a London court and action was not taken before the accused woman was found guilty.'
- 46 *Sunday Times*, August 4, 1974, p. 1
- 47 *New Nigerian*, August 3, 1974, p. 1 It was reliably learnt that Gowon was reluctant to let Mr Tarka go especially since his case had not been proven
- 48 *Sunday Observer*, August 4, 1974, p. 1
- 49 *Sunday Times*, July 28, 1974, p. 1
- 50 *Sunday Observer*, August 4, 1974, p. 1
- 51 An interesting account of this perspective of conflict along the old North-South line, by Sidi H. Ali; *Tarka: Sectional Press Victim of Political Blackmail*
- 52 The internal politics of Benue-Plateau State and the roles of Tarka versus Paul Unongo, as well as the issue of creation of three local government authorities in Tivland, was said to have created animosity between Mr J.S. Tarka and Mr Gomwalk. *The Nigerian Standard*, 13, November, 1982 has an interesting reminiscence into this matter.
- 53 Mr Aper Aku was a former Principal of the Federal Training Centre in Kaduna. He resigned and returned to private life and was said to be a protegee of Mr J.S. Tarka.
- 54 Instead a letter was written to Mr Aper Aku by an unknown man from Plateau Section of Benue-Plateau State.
- 55 Aper Aku, 'Letter to the Military Governor of Benue State', Jos, 13 August 1974 (mimeograph).
- 56 Aper Aku, 'Affidavit in support of my allegations against Joseph Deshi Gomwalk, Military Governor of Benue-Plateau State of Nigeria', High Court of Justice, Jos, 31 August, 1974.
- 57 Alhaji I.R. Abubakar, 'A Release from Government House', 3rd September 1974, p. 1
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 2
- 59 See Police Press Release: Issued by the Police Relations Department, Jos, No. 3874, 3rd September 1974. This release entitled 'Correction of News Item' denied that Aku was arrested because of his affidavit against Gomwalk. It stated: 'The truth is that Mr Aper Aku has since 28th August, 1974 been asked through Divisional Police Officer Gboko, to report to the Commissioner of Police, Jos, in connection with a letter he wrote earlier about the Benue-Plateau State Government which he was circulating from house to house in all the divisional areas of the State. He reported himself at the State Police Headquarters on Saturday the 31st August, 1974 and is being questioned in connection with the mass circulation of the said letter which is considered capable of causing disaffection among various communities in the state as well as lead to breakdown of law and order. The Commissioner wishes to stress the fact that the Police did not know that Mr Aper Aku had sworn to an affidavit until Monday the 2nd September 1974.' (p. 1)
- 60 This author has in his possession Gomwalk's 28 foolscap page rebuttal of Aku's 26-point affidavit which he submitted to General Gowon. In it he ended, 'I await any directives or orders you may wish to give . . . (p. 27) It was also widely published in national dailies.
- 61 *Daily Times*, September 9, 1974.
- 62 See full text of statement by the Federal Military Government in *New Nigerian*, 9 September, 1974, pp. 1-2
- 63 General Ekpo (then Commandant of the Nigerian Defence Academy) had commented negatively on the Tarka issue and had urged Tarka to go (*Sunday Times*, July 28, 1974). Brigadier (later Major-General) E.O. Abisoye said, 'I believe there is some element of truth in these allegations unless the people concerned were cleared by courts.'

He went further — that corrupt elements should face firing squad, even though he believed Gowon must have verified the Gomwalk case. (*New Nigerian*, 12 September, 1974 p. 1). Ironically, it was alleged that General Abisoye (was?) retired from the army because of allegations of corruption against him. If true, there were no shots heard from the firing squad.

64 *Daily Times*, September 18, 1974. p. 1

65 Reliable information from some senior military officers revealed that some of them wanted to prove to Gowon the need to change his corrupt governors and had wanted more affidavits to come up. Unfortunately for them, the Advisory Judicial Committee (AJC) declared on September 1974, that 'no affidavits should be allowed to be sworn before public officers including commissioners for oaths unless such affidavits are in respect of any proceedings in court.' *New Nigerian*, 10 September, 1974, p. 16. Nigerians were urged to lodge complaints about criminal offences or suspected wrong-doers with law enforcement officers.

66 The dates were September 1-8, 1974.

67 See Benue-Plateau State of Nigeria, *Report of the Panel Investigating Benue-Plateau Houses, Contract Procedure and Matters Related to Misconduct by Public Officers and others in respect of such Contracts: Main Report* (Jos: Government Printer, October 1975). This panel, headed by Justice Alfa Belgore, declared:

We have come to the conclusion that the record of Mr Joseph Dechi Gomwalk as Military Governor was that of great corruption and ignoble arrangements to waste government money and therefore gam from such wastage for himself, his cronies and his family. (p. 192)

(Other members of this panel were; Mr V.K. Dangin, Mr A.M. Elahi, and Mr B. A. Bur, secretary)

68 See Gomwalk's broadcast to the State in which he said:

I want to take this opportunity to warn some elements in our midst. These elements from outside the state pose as if they are friends of one or the other of our many ethnic groups in the state. . . . I want to tell you here that these people do not mean well for you. Do not listen to them. *Daily Times*, September 19, 1974. p. 1

69 Mr Aku has sued both Mr Akure and Daboh, as well as the *Nigerian Standard*, claiming ₦16 millions. At the time of writing this case has not come up.

70 'Bashas' are ramshackle buildings put up by soldiers themselves as temporary dwellings.

71 Jemibewon, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

72 Broadcast to The Nation, by His Excellency Brigadier Murtala Mohammed, Head of the Federal Military Government, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, on 30 July, 1975. See Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Drift and Chaos Arrested* (Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1975) p. 6, in which Mohammed said:

Unknown to the general public, the feeling of disillusion was also evident among members of the armed forces whose administration was neglected, but, who, out of sheer loyalty to the Nation, and, in the hope that there would be a change, continued to suffer in silence. Things got to a stage where the head of the administration became virtually inaccessible, even to official advisers; and when advice was tendered, it was often ignored. (pp. 5-6)

73 *Unity, Stability and Progress, loc. cit.*, p. 9

74 *New Nigerian*, December 18, 1973.

75 *Daily Times*, December 18, 1973. p. 1

- 76 See an interesting discussion of 'Enahoro and State of Emergency' by Omo Oye, *Daily Times*, March 18, 1974. p. 7
- 77 *Daily Times*, May 16, 1974, p. 1
- 78 *The Nigerian Standard*, 20, October, 1974, p. 1
- 79 See *Daily Times*, September 26, 1974. p. 1 also, in *The Nigerian Observer*, September 26, 1976. See Enahoro's speech to his Ministry's staff, *Daily Times*, 26 September 1974. p. 11
- 80 *New Nigerian*, 22 March, 1974 pp. 5,6 - in which Ogbemudia said:

What we now find, however, is that the generality ponder in their minds whether it actually matters who leads them - whether the man in green khaki or in agbada. Hence, the provision of pipe-borne water, electricity, education, good roads, excellent health facilities and promising economic opportunities may have nothing to do with the characteristics of the individuals who provide these services but with their capacity to respond to the followers' demands

- 81 *Daily Times*, April 12, 1974, p. 7
- 82 *The Nigerian Standard*, 6, October, 1974, p. 1
- 83 *The Nigerian Standard*, 20 October, 1974. Italics are mine.
- 84 No Advisory Council was set up before July 1975, so it was not clear what the functions of this institution would have been - a mini-parliament or mere forum for discussion?
- 85 The names of the twenty-two soldiers released were: Col C.D. Nwawo, Lt-Col A B. Nwajei, Major Albert Okonkwo, Major A. Asoya, Major A. Ademoyega, Captain B. Gbulie, Captain E.M. Udeaja, Captain G N. Okonkwo, Captain J.N. Isichei, Lt F.M. Okocha, Lt F.O. Amuchienwa, Lt B.A.O. Oyewole, Lt N.S. Nwokocha, Lt G.B. Ikejiofor, Lt G.G. Onyefuru, Lt A.R.O. Egbikor, Lt A.N. Azubuogu and 2nd/Lt C.G. Ngwuluka. All were dismissed from the Nigerian Army. Two officers were retired; Lt J.C. Ojukwu (with four year's benefits) and Lt J.O. Ijeweze (one year's benefit). *The Nigerian Observer*, October 26, 1974.
- 86 *Daily Times*, May 16, 1974. p. 1
- 87 Interview: Gowon, May 21st, 1979.

## Chapter 13

# The Curtains Fall

All the world's a stage: And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; . . . . . I now make my exit. . . . .<sup>1</sup>

The period between October 1974 and June 1975 witnessed new issues of conflict emerging in the political arena. The tempo of political belligerence among citizens heightened after October 1974. Increasingly, every issue became politicized and all social forces gradually took on 'radical' postures. New problems which emerged only helped to offer disenchanted people the opportunity to strain the nerves of government. A few issues will serve to illustrate this point.

In his budget broadcast of April 20, 1970, Gowon had promised to establish a Salaries and Wages Review Commission, 'to review the existing wages and salaries at all levels in the Public Services, Statutory Corporations and State-owned companies and determine the areas in which salaries, wages and other remunerations in the private sector can be rationalized and harmonized with those in the public sector'.<sup>2</sup> This promise was fulfilled by the establishment of the above mentioned commission under Mr Jerome Udoji. The commission made many recommendations including a salary structure ranging from ₦ 720.00 (at Grade Level G.L.-01) to ₦ 13,959 (for G.L. 17 per annum). In addition, the commission made recommendations regarding the public service structure and how to retain public service morale and norms for more efficient performance.

Unfortunately, the other salient aspects of the report got drowned amidst the political atmosphere of the period. Only dissatisfaction with recommended salaries pervaded the polity. Strikes and lock-outs, despite the decrees banning them, spread like wildfire – labour unions, doctors and others reacted swiftly. In principle, the attempt by the government to improve wage-earning capabilities and conditions of service of workers, was very laudable. However, Nigeria's typical politico-economic system made a mockery of the efforts. Market prices galloped very quickly – at times at the rate of 300%, depending on the item. This detracted from the workers' purchasing

capability and neutralized the impact of what came to be known as 'Udoji Awards'.

Even more disturbing was the fact that Nigerians ignored the conditions of service and other recommendations for reorganization embedded in the report. The concern for salaries led to industrial instability in the 1974-75 period. For three months in 1975, industrial unrest gripped the nation, paralysing salient industrial activities. In reaction Gowon appealed to the nation twice for industrial peace.<sup>3</sup> As things worsened, and apparently in exasperation, Gowon pledged to fight for industrial peace and stability in the country in spite of attempts to erode his credibility by detractors. He was even more furious that some Nigerians had anonymously circulated inflated salary scales for the military in order to alienate public support for his government and create widespread instability in the country.

It was a very hard period for the military government. A laudable action had boomeranged on the decision-makers. In fact, the industrial unrest which lasted up to about the end of March 1975, threatened the very existence of the regime. For Gowon and his associates much of the industrial unrest had its source among ambitious politicians around the country who wanted to force the military out of government.

Yet, these were not Gowon's only headaches. The *Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture* (FESTAC) was originally planned for late 1975. There were many allegations of inadequate preparations, and gross embezzlement of funds allocated to this project. As the dates drew nearer, it became clearer that a more effective arrangement was necessary. To many observers, the FESTAC arrangements provided opportunities for corruption among Gowon's lieutenants. It is interesting that a panel was set up later by the Mohammed regime to probe FESTAC activities. The panel's report, which was initially circulated, quietly died a natural death amidst rumours that Chief Anthony Enahoro was going to present documents which would have exposed some military officers (then in power) of corrupt behaviour in the FESTAC arrangements.

However, initial criticisms of Gowon for wasting huge amounts of money on structures, such as the National Theatre at Iganmu, seem misplaced. The National Theatre has become a hub of national and international activities. It has proven to be a very worthwhile project.

Similar allegations of corruption trailed Gowon's *Universal Primary Education* (UPE) programme. Announced in Sokoto during Gowon's state visit, the UPE programme was to be funded by the Federal Government. It was to provide free education for the average child of school age. The Federal Government in its Third Development Plan had allocated ₦ 2,000 million naira to the Education Ministry to execute the UPE programme. It was estimated that 11.5

million primary school children would have benefitted from this programme by the end of the plan period, as mentioned in the last chapter. In the execution of this programme contracts were awarded by various state governments for school and college buildings. From various states came allegations of corruption in the award of these contracts.

It is ironic though, that while Gowon had taken on the brunt of public criticisms over the implementation of the UPE programme, his successors launched the programme in 1976, full of fanfare and praise. It is also amusing that the same Obasanjo regime which took credit (unduly) for this project in 1976, later blamed the Gowon regime for bad planning when things later turned sour in the execution of the UPE programme. But such ironies abound in politics. So was it also with Murtala Mohammed airport which Gowon was blamed for expending so much of the country's resources on. Declared open by his successors, Gowon got no credit for it. It must, however, be admitted that some Nigerians criticized the government for the cost of the project rather than the project itself, when they compared it with the Nairobi airport. Even today, many foreign firms inflate their prices when bidding for contracts in Nigeria in their efforts to help deplete the country's so-called petronaira, and attempt to recover whatever Western countries lost to Nigeria in purchase of petroleum. Nigerian officials, and their contractor fronts of course, have helped them in this swindling process.

The most important point, however, is that the course of Gowon's rule from October 1974 was punctuated by crises and pestered by distractions. Among such problems which persisted was the abandoned properties issue.

As discussed earlier, it was a Federal Government policy that properties abandoned by people as a result of the crisis and the Civil War should be returned to their owners. For a long time, the Rivers State Government held out on the return to the owners of properties abandoned by Ibos after the Civil War. This was partially understandable — that given the legacy of animosity between the Ijaws and Ibos in the former Eastern Region, it was not possible to effect this policy in the Rivers State as was done in other states. Hostile exchanges between the two states evolved, and it took quite some time to normalize relations for effective co-operation between these two states in ESIALA.

In Gowon's characteristic fashion, he appealed to the Rivers State Government to see the logic of handing over these properties, which were mainly landed properties. Hence in November 1971, the Rivers State Government announced that it would hand back 1,000 houses to their owners.<sup>5</sup> In 1972 it announced the release of 100 houses to their owners.<sup>6</sup> The issue of abandoned properties continued to be an

important variable in the relations between the East-Central and Rivers States. That animosity between the two states hovered in the background of the abandoned properties issue was substantiated by the Governor of the Rivers State in his answers to questions related to this issue on Kaduna television. The Governor said:

. . . It is important at this stage to mention that the abandoned property issue had all along proved a handy weapon in the hands of those very people who had gone to war in 1976 to prevent the creation of the Rivers State.<sup>7</sup>

If nothing else, the withholding of action on abandoned properties did demonstrate to the East-Central State that the Rivers State had become an autonomous state. The Federal Government took no punitive measures against the Rivers State Governor. For Gowon, the technique of *reconciliation* through compromise in Nigeria's 'Military Federalism' was better than penetration or control of sub-national units through *mobilization* or coercion. This attitude of Gowon's was seen by many people as weakness. For Gowon it was not. It was a useful political strategy in the complex and heterogeneous polity. The abandoned properties issue is important enough to mention here, because Gowon's successors found it so important an issue that they appointed a resident panel headed by a military officer of the rank of a Major, to resolve the issue. For some people, it typified the very weakness of Gowon's control over his subordinates. On the other hand, Gowon saw the military government under him as one with a difference - a politically decent one, which shedded the toughness typical of military regimos.

This leads us to promised changes in the political setting. Gowon had promised to *change Federal Commissioners* by December 31st 1974. In January 1975, he swore in to office a new set of commissioners. Ironically, the new commissioners comprised, in the main, the old commissioners. Only a few old commissioners were dropped. Many Nigerians did not see this as a drastic change or a refreshing breeze into Gowon's government - especially in a country in which talent for such jobs was not in short supply.

Perhaps, like some other human beings Gowon found it difficult to change those whom he knew very well and those of whose capabilities he was aware, for those whose qualities he could not ascertain, especially in troubled times. He seemed disinclined to gamble with new appointments; nor was he ready to effect changes because there were demands for such. By December 1974, Gowon had become bitter about his lieutenants letting him down. He turned round and found increasingly that fewer people could be trusted. In the circumstances he probably thought it was better to retain those he understood a bit.

The various demands for the *change of governors* is another interesting case. He had promised on October 1, 1974 to change the governors by March 31, 1975. That date came and passed without the cashing of this promise. For some Nigerians the Gowon who had adhered to his promises meticulously was now building a reputation for breaching them. This made further inroads into his credibility. In fact, there were even amusing rumours about Gowon's reluctance to change his notorious governors. Some people rumoured that Gowon had become too 'imprisoned' by his very 'chummy' relations with these governors to have easily seen their weaknesses. Others claimed that the governors threatened their Commander-in-Chief. This rumour held that the governors had threatened not to resign unless Gowon also resigned from office.

Gowon reacted to this with great amusement. He could not understand how his governors – the governors he appointed – could have threatened him. In the first place, the governors did not appoint him. In the second place, he and the governors were not appointed on the same date by a Supreme Military Council. Gowon as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and HFMG had appointed the governors to carry out specific military assignments. Let us see Gowon's reactions to the above rumours and allegations.

Well, I think the simple answer is just — all rubbish. I was an undisputed leader of the team that I was leading. There was absolute respect for me as a person, as an individual, and as their professional head . . . These governors were chosen by me; I invited them and chose them and they knew exactly why they were there and that they were there to perform a particular duty to the nation . . . If they failed to do so they knew what would happen to them. And they knew we had a military government and they could be removed at short notice.<sup>8</sup>

Given the situation, General Gowon could not understand how such a rumour could even have emerged. He had the power to act, but believed in cautious use of that power. Gowon sincerely believed that by using power sparingly he could instil some values of leadership and tolerance in his subordinates. We shall get back to this point later. But one important implication of the demand for the governors' removal, was that Gowon should go. If the governors were said to have stayed too long in office; Gowon had preceded them. By logic, Gowon had also stayed too long in office. As one military officer opined, it is possible that this underlying implication disturbed Gowon. A moralist, Gowon might have said to himself, 'how fair is it for me to change the governors because they have been long in office, when I have been longer in my position?'

There is no evidence that the governors disrespected their boss to the point of threatening him. True, the governors had wide latitudes within which to operate – a point we shall discuss immediately. But there was no doubt that those governors this author interviewed held Gowon in very high esteem. According to General Gowon, the governors had actually requested him to reassign them in the light of many pressures and demands from within the military and the larger society. As he put it:

they approached me and asked me to change them in the interest of the nation and also in order to allow some of their colleagues to come and taste what they think we have been enjoying all the times. Let them come and have the headaches we have been living with all this time. Please change us.' And I told them that it was my decision, and that 'I would change you as, and when, I deem it fit. I appointed you and I will be the one to decide when you will go back to the barracks. Go back to the barracks you will, but it will be at my own time and at the time that I think it is appropriate and right.' What happened was that I had all my plans and there was a diagram that I had done; it was in my office at Dodan Barracks after the July 1975 coup. That chart is there with the list of all the governors being changed and the possible governors replacing them in almost all the areas.<sup>9</sup>

If the governors had requested Gowon to change them, and he had a chart indicating old and new governors of states, why did he not change them? In a way Yakubu Gowon is a very stubborn person when he convinces himself about an issue. It takes him a long time to arrive at a decision, but as discussed earlier, when it is taken he sticks to it stubbornly. Those military chaps who tried to use him to destroy their colleagues know this. He is not the type to succumb to pressures very easily, even though he would listen to all views. It did seem that from the events of 1974 and early 1975 Gowon had become disenchanted with many of his colleagues and other seemingly responsible citizens. He had come to see how selfish and petty some of these people were. His basic assumptions about the innate goodness of human nature were always ruthlessly challenged. From research, it was found that Gowon, at crisis periods such as the country experienced in 1974–75, muttered such words as: 'if you are honest and hardworking, these people will still not appreciate it and will undercut you.'

Perhaps, as he saw those he respected jockeying for favours, mudslinging and lying profusely about issues of which he knew the truth very well, he stuck more closely to those aides whose foibles he knew and whose behaviour he could anticipate. He probably saw that

there would be little difference if he changed the governors. One thing was clear, however, he believed that those with whom he had worked for a long time knew the ropes and nuances of the system. Why did he not keep his promise of changing the governors?

Gowon enumerated a number of reasons for his action. He could not keep to his April 1975 deadline because the governors had been involved in the Five-Year Development Plan and he wanted them to complete the plan and let it take off appropriately under them. After all, the governors had executed the Second Plan which was, on balance, successfully implemented. He then thought that the period June-August 1975 would be most ideal, to enable the old and new governors (on reassignment) find schools for their children. The consideration for using the period of long holidays became paramount.

Then Gowon thought about the plan for the state visit of the Queen of England. He had been given a rousing welcome by the Queen and her subjects during his state visit to England in 1973 and wanted to reciprocate that gesture of goodwill during her visit to Nigeria. For Gowon, the governors who were on the seats should be allowed to handle these arrangements until after the Queen's visit billed for mid-October 1975.

Yet, even after this Gowon found that he still needed the governors for a further period. The Festival of Arts and Culture was scheduled for November-December 1975. To the Head of State, this involved an important issue of the image of Africa and Nigeria in the world and he would not like to see anything go wrong with it. Hence he thought that 'the people who knew the problems involved, the people who had been with me, who had been along with me all the time in preparing this festival, should help me see it successfully carried out before they left.'<sup>10</sup> According to him;

I had promised, and I told this to a lot of soldiers, a lot of colleagues, that because of these things I certainly would not be able to change the governors until the end of December and by 1st of January. I had planned in any case to change all of them and make a broadcast to effect the change and have new people in their places.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the sequential nature of the reasons for the delay in changing the governors indicate a rationalization. But it would seem that Gowon was being honest. He really believed that these reasons were cogent enough for the governors to stay. Perhaps, more important, was the subconscious reluctance of Gowon to part with those 'who had been along with me all the time . . .' He knew them and their capabilities, whatever these were. He trusted that a certain level

of efficiency would be attained in executing his projects, even given the weaknesses of these governors, and thus did not wish to gamble with new people, who did not know the ropes.

Gowon probably had a point, but he forgot that the Civil Service provided continuity between leaders of governments. Agreed, the governors would know the system better, but unless one effected a change at a point, new projects would always make such a change impossible. His reluctance to change the governors eroded his credibility very badly. In a democratic setting, a 'bad' governor could be changed, (all things being equal) at the polls. In a military regime, only the HFMG could appoint and change governors. The performance of the governors reflected on the Head of State. Hence in many states, such as East-Central, people began to feel that Gowon kept the governors in order to punish them. Poor performances at state level thus detracted from the legitimacy of the government at the centre.

Ironically, the pressures for change of governors coincided with the period of heightened crisis in the country and Gowon's frustrations in finding whom to trust, and from whom he could get the truth. He had trusted everyone and gradually by January 1975, the opposite extreme was being gradually attained - finding no one trustworthy. Most Nigerians would confirm that Gowon was a very disciplined man, a noble leader, an impartial arbiter in the context of Nigeria's geoethnic competition and a clean man amidst corrupt lieutenants. His downfall was caused mainly by the behaviour of his lieutenants, and his apparent inability or reluctance to call them to order. Was it true that Gowon did not call his lieutenants to order? What was his style of government?

To understand this issue one needs to have an idea of the working of Gowon's mind and how he sees government and administration, his relations with his subordinates and aides, and his conception of decision-making as an art. A few quotations from interviews with him gives us a good insight. According to Gowon, it was not true that he did not call his lieutenants to order, and one's interpretation depended on one's approach to administration.

As I told you earlier, my method of approach to my subordinates is that there must be trust and confidence among us. Unless there is this trust and confidence they would not be able to discharge their duties and responsibilities as well as they should have been able to. Now the position here is that the governors carried out instructions they were given and they were just allowed to get on with the work they were doing with the least interference except if things were going wrong or I received an adverse report about something that was going on that should not have been going on. Then, of course, one came in and they were called to order. The

thing was that one did not announce this over the radio nor did one disgrace them but tried to correct them, to put things right, and tell them to get on with their work. I believe that what one should do as a leader is not to destroy aides but to correct them, to put them right and encourage them to get on and do the right thing. In that way you helped to build a human being rather than humiliating him, the way some people would like you to do. The governors certainly respected me and that respect continued, right through and up till now.<sup>12</sup>

Gowon's view of administration was one which exhorted delegation of authority to subordinates whom one trusted would carry out the job. He very much allowed them wide latitudes for operation until there were problems. His very credulous self and his reluctance to hurt people, were good personal qualities. In governing human beings credulity is an expensive political commodity for a leader, especially a military leader who was expected to effectively supervise his aides. Trusting that your lieutenant would carry out obligations effectively until problems arose, perhaps smacked of too much devotion of authority within Nigeria's 'military federalism'. In a way it could be argued that Gowon was a good federalist and perhaps would have been a good civilian leader in a federal system with checks and balances which regulate the autonomy of component units. But unfortunately Gowon was a military leader and was expected to maintain a hierarchy of command and supervision.

Obviously Gowon's technique was more civilian than military – to the frustration of many of colleagues – who would have preferred a more drastic, swift, and at times, cruder military approach. The excerpt below shows how he related to the governors.

I have my own methods. I appointed these people and we were having an experiment. We were creating twelve new states and I could not sit down, with war in my hand, with the nation to look after, with international problems to deal with; I had not got the time, you know, to go into day-to-day problems in the various states. So I appointed these people and I gave them a trust to go and do their best for their states . . . I appointed the governors and if you appoint somebody to a post, give him the trust, give him the confidence. If he does something wrong, well he can rest assured that you are bound to know about it, people are bound to report about it . . . and you know in Nigeria what we had was, you will agree with me, a free press. They were not taken over by government, and people criticised the government left, right and centre. People criticized the governors left, right and centre. Now, people wrote to me complaining about what was happening, and

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there were hundred and one ways in which some of the things that happened in the states got to me.

When I got them, what I did was to call the governors to order and tell them: 'I do not like having that and you better review your stand on that particular issue', and I can assure you that there was respect between us. They knew that one was serious. And one advised them, 'if you have any problem, come down, let us discuss it'. The chap would come down with his problem, we looked into it and if one could not give him an immediate answer, one took the problem to one's advisers to look into the various implications of the problem - economic, financial, political and social, and by the time I passed all the advice to them and they used these, it helped to resolve the problem and we got on with the job . . . I think it is unnecessary for the man at the top to keep on pestering the life of the person that he appointed. And I thought that you should give them a free hand to get on with the job and only just come in to put them right and if things were going wrong to stop the rot so as to enable him take a new line and arrive at the desired results in the final analysis. So certainly my method was one of least interference and where it was necessary, then one came in to explain the problem to the person concerned and got him to change his approach . . . to the new one I had suggested.

The above excerpt of interview with the General is self-explanatory. Again, in a system in which the governors did not combine executive and legislative powers, this approach would have been quite satisfactory, since the checks in the system would relatively constrain the governors in their actions. But these governors were very powerful and had both executive and legislative powers. While trust and confidence in subordinates are important elements of administration, Gowon's aides, very often, did not return such trust and confidence by their performances.

A very interesting aspect of Gowon's administrative approach which came out glaringly from the two excerpts above, is that there was hardly any place for punitive measures. Gowon's belief in innate goodness of man got him also to believe that his aides would necessarily change their methods of administration or their behaviour. Many of his governors behaved like 'Titans' in the states, and only demonstrated humility and meekness when they met with Gowon or were in his company. What about punitive measures? Again let us see how General Gowon's mind worked regarding this issue:

. . . If a problem had got a lot of other implications then one would have to seek for advice. And then whenever we met at SMC meetings or again at the Senior Officers Meetings, some of the

wrong-doings were brought out so that every other person knew about it and they knew how one felt about it and how one felt about them and how things should be organized next time. This was the way we dealt with it. True enough, one did not use the sort of old school prefect method of calling the chap and asking him to strip down for six of the best. Nor do you go to the press and announce 'I have dealt with this governor or that governor in this way.' My goodness, if you do that, then you certainly do not respect yourself. Respect begets respect. If I treat my subordinates and those I appointed so shabbily, you think of the respect that one will have from the subordinates and also from other people. The same people who reported this, as soon as they see these things happening, will say, 'if this is the way he treats his own subordinates that he appointed, if he has the opportunity, how is he going to treat us?' It is really a question of approach. They were not allowed to get away free. There are a number of ways of dealing with problems and I can assure you I handled them in my particular way.

There was no doubt that Gowon did call some of his aides to order. On a number of occasions he was angry with others. But his attitude was one of treating his subordinates as members of a large family. In this regard, it is important to note that Gowon believed throughout his rule that he was training future leaders. He saw himself as a statesman bringing up younger ones and therefore saw his role as one of essentially correcting them rather than destroying them. What he glossed over though was that punishment is part and parcel of the correction package. Even his own mother had to give him a good whipping when he was a boy in order to correct him.

However, for one who generally believed that he was head of a family, training younger ones, Gowon found it hard to hurt his subordinates. His religious up-bringing was really very strong in his character (and those who know him well confirm this) no matter his weaknesses as a leader. Faced with the accusation that he lacked the stomach to hurt – a necessary quality of leadership, Gowon quickly retorted:

I believe in the saying; 'Man is not to destroy but to build, not to hurt, but to heal, not to kill but to save life.' If I had wanted I could have destroyed a number of people. I could have destroyed somebody like Murtala, but I did not [between mid-1966 and August 1967].

The tone of his quotation sounds biblical. Gowon detested killing and yet he remained a soldier. This paradox in his character is an

important factor in his administration. One of his aides was so puzzled by this dual quality in Gowon's personality - a good soldier and staunch Christian - both aspects influencing his decisions, that he observed of Yakubu Gowon: 'he should have been a priest instead of being a soldier.'<sup>13</sup>

His reluctance to hurt people, was evidently a weakness in his leadership character. Yet, at times it was an asset. In the case of Murtala Mohammed, the lessons were very clear. After the chequered relations between the men in 1966-1967, Murtala went politically fallow and limp apart from his signals corp duties. He was doing only minimal work in the polity and he had written many times to Gowon to release him from the army. Gowon refused. Gowon did not destroy him but planned to create a Brigade under him to be stationed at Okene, should Ojukwu (given security reports then) invade the Midwest Region. But before it could materialize, Ojukwu had invaded the Midwest and Gowon then gave Murtala a Division to deal with the situation. As Gowon mused, 'If I had destroyed him, I would not have been able to use him during the Civil War'.

Again after the Niger bridge crossing disasters, Murtala came under heavy criticism from his colleagues - both at the war front and at the headquarters. For any commander to have lost so many people was humiliating. Murtala later reprieved himself when he listened to the advice from headquarters (which he had rejected earlier) and captured Onitsha, through 1 Division Area. At the end of it Murtala lost confidence in himself, partly because of the heavy criticism to which he had been subjected. He then requested for a posting back to the Signals. In some countries, Murtala would have been court-martialled for rejecting orders from headquarters and subsequently losing so many lives. Did Gowon punish him? For Gowon, it was, not necessary:

Honestly, mine is not to destroy anyone. There is no doubt about it, for his contribution to the war efforts and to the country generally, I thought one must not use a big hand and destroy such a promising young man. Honestly, I just allowed him to get on with his work. He virtually cut off himself except concentrating on his signals and since he was doing a good job there and was getting our communications properly through I did not bother until when I decided to appoint him the Commissioner for Communications, to bring him out of the cold, to come and join and then use his ability and talents to help build the nation . . . But as I have said earlier on he made his contribution, as usual, in a very forceful way - sometimes even to the point of being rude. But as far as I was concerned, that was his style and one should be able to tolerate him. One was trying to teach others and to teach all of

them, that if one should have any chance of making it in the future every leader had got to be prepared to accept these various approaches either to him or to his style of government.

That was Gowon the teacher in arts of tolerance. Most of his subordinates would testify to his equanimity even amidst provocation. He allowed his aides to argue with him and even tolerated their rudeness and temper tensions. For Gowon, 'it was a great fun; it brought the best out of us. The show of temper by individuals now and again, only helped to make the whole system very lively and exciting.' Otherwise, Gowon believed it would have been 'a very dull place, if everybody would just keep on saying, yes sir! yes sir! salute and just go on to do it.'

Gowon allowed his aides to air their views, rudely or otherwise. He restrained his temper and saw the merit of points made, even if he disliked the way they were communicated. Quite a number of Gowon's military subordinates disliked his high level of tolerance and unmilitary attitude of listening to rude remarks and even queries by his juniors, without taking punitive action against them. Ironically, even though Murtala was one of the rudest officers to Gowon, he would not stand any indiscipline or rudeness by his juniors. He would have taken a swift, military type action against the fellow.

Very often people ignore the importance of Gowon's background to his attitude. As discussed in Chapter 4, Gowon's mother is an ebullient extrovert. On the other hand, his father was a passive introvert. Daniel and Dauda take after the mother and are blunt extroverts, warm and friendly. Yakubu is a mixture of his dad and mum. The man blended his mother's sunny and forthright traits with the father's passive and restrained characteristics. Thus a very warm and friendly Yakubu who strikes you immediately as a forthright fellow, has this undercurrent of reserve. He is no doubt forthright, but exercises much restraint in taking actions.

Many of his aides interviewed, including those who worked at Dodan Barracks with him and in other areas, confirmed that at times, when provoked, Yakubu Gowon would react as if he was going to take drastic action, only to be restrained or held back by some apparent inner force. This unknown inner force seems to be the passive, calculating trait acquired from his father which calms his exuberance and imposes a reconsideration of all aspects of the whole case before reacting.

This was very clear during crisis periods of October 1974 to January 1975. Some of Gowon's military colleagues pressed Gowon for decisive military action to end the industrial crisis and the apparent drift in the political system. At one point, it seemed as if he was convinced about the necessity for such military action. Yet, the old

Yohanna in Yakubu (with the Bible close to the heart) turned it down after reconsideration. As he later observed, in his address to his new commissioners in January 1975,

... The intention behind all these is obvious, but we have refused to be goaded by such subversive acts to taking the action which most people consider obvious but which we know will lead to the innocent getting hurt while the real culprits take cover.<sup>14</sup>

For some military officers close to him, such over-consideration given to issues which they thought could be handled quickly and militarily, was frustrating. It was not unusual to hear some military men wonder whether Gowon was running a military government or a civilian administration. Yet all those interviewed confirmed that he was an excellent soldier, even though they saw him as a weak leader of a military government.

Perhaps, Gowon's problems in 1975 were even multiplied by what may be regarded as 'Dodan Barracks Politics' involving his aides. The relations between Gowon's aide-de-camp, (ADC) Lt-Col William Walbe, and the commander of the Brigade of Guards, Col Joseph Garba, reached an intolerably sour level in 1975. Each tried to get the ear of General Gowon against the other. But Gowon knew pretty well their weaknesses and their strengths and refused to edge one out for the other. He treated them as members of a family to whom he had a responsibility. It is not clear what the main issues of contention were between these two, but scanty evidence indicates that Walbe and Garba (one Angas and the other Yergam from present Plateau State) were classmates in military school. Collegiate competition between peers could have been one of the reasons. The other was ascendancy at Dodan Barracks in terms of influence. It is even suggested that both officers were materialistic in their tastes and perquisites of office which accrued to such aides might have provided a potent source of friction.

Gowon's police ADC, Mr Yaroson (Victoria Gowon's brother-in-law) was in the background most of the time but had some occasional brushes with Lt-Col Walbe. Essentially the relationship among members of Gowon's Dodan Barracks family - notably Walbe, Garba, Yaroson and Tarfa made things more intolerable for Gowon. He refused to take drastic actions against any one of these or any other senior officers about whom he was fed stories. In leaving matters to take their due course and by refusing to order arrests of colleagues unless he had adequate proof, Gowon frustrated many of his aides. It was not even unusual for officers within the military to tell tales about one another to excite Gowon's actions. His belief that one could not act on such stories and rumours was a mark of nobility. But it also cost him quite dearly later.

Even given this above view of a restrained Gowon, there were a few times he put his foot down and told his colleagues to go to hell. Let us again use the Murtala case because of the interest it has generated in the country. Murtala was a very intelligent and hard-working officer, but he was often impulsive and temperamental (a trait that earned him the name 'bulldozer' among some of his colleagues). On a few occasions at FEC meetings he was very rude to Graham-Douglas, the Attorney-General, and Chief A.Y. Eke. On these occasions, Gowon had to call him to order because of the way he was addressing them. On the issue of the appointment of Mr Odor as the General Manager of the refinery at Port Harcourt, Gowon put his foot down. Mr Odor had been accused of having sabotaged the refinery at Port Harcourt in order to deny the FMG the use of the oil during the war. For some members of the Council, including Murtala, the past records of the man disqualified him for the job.

However, for Gowon the best man for the job should get it; and, after all, the Civil War was over. What worried Gowon most was that those who had opposed Mr Odor's appointment were pushing for a decision in favour of their candidates. He took a decision on this and stood by it. This decision was later cancelled by the Mohammed regime because it claimed that it was taken against the advice of the council.<sup>15</sup>

From evidence available, Gowon undoubtedly took his decisions publicly and openly. His documents were collected after each council meeting by the Secretary to the Federal Military Government (SFMG) and were used to verify decisions. Thus decisions on Lockheed plane purchases and cement orders were all on file, and to his credit Gowon's name was cleared in each case by the panels of inquiry set up by his successors. Gowon was not the corrupt type and one of the senior officers who organized the July 1975 coup against him, admitted so thus:

I do not see Gowon as one who would sit down and organize to steal money . . . Gowon's military pride, his upbringing and his Christian feeling would dissuade him from robbing the government, but above all his military pride.<sup>16</sup>

But why was there a coup against Gowon? His over-consideration of issues had led to vacillation which had created impressions of drift and inertia. As the old traits of the political system resurfaced, Gowon found his reconciliation capabilities strained. He not only had to balance the political arena with the economic sector (and its myriads of industrial strikes), the military sector (which was the most delicate sector) became restive because of his seeming nonchalance.

Increasingly, the passive and reserved characteristics of Gowon

became the dominant variable in Gowon's personality. As he became frustrated by the duplicity and unreliability of his lieutenants, he withdrew increasingly into his inner self. He took no decisions, such as Obasanjo took later, to chuck out those on whom he could no longer rely. He kept relying on those who had challenged his credibility, always hoping that they would change.

His silence and 'low profile' attitude regarding what he intended to do, in addition to his vacillation, did not help the situation. His holidays of May 1974 in Jos are an illustration. He had taken a helicopter reconnaissance trip over Kagoro, Kafanchan, Keffi and Abuja areas,<sup>17</sup> and he even took some photographs (which are still with his former ADC) in an effort to make up his mind about the location of a new Federal Capital. The nation and even many of his colleagues in government and in the military did not know this. Such communication gaps which had widened gradually towards the end of his regime in 1975 reflected the atmosphere of the period, and this increased the anxiety of many of his well-wishers.<sup>18</sup>

As in accounts of all coups, versions vary from one individual to the other. Since this writer is not a participant observer, he can only provide a synthesis of the various versions he got from the participants during his research.

As we discussed earlier, there had always been rumours of coups since 1966, every January and July of each year. In fact, Murtala Mohammed and Ibrahim Taiwo, among others had, at different times, been suspected by intelligence agencies of plotting to overthrow the government.<sup>19</sup> Since the Tarka and Gomwalk affairs, the political atmosphere was never the same again. The government became more suspicious and military men, even in the intelligence units, became more disenchanted and unreliable. They were thoroughly perturbed by the public clearance given to Gomwalk. The situation provided a fertile ground for planning and hatching coups against the government of the day.

In September 1974, at the Senior Army Officers' meeting in Lagos, Gowon had asked each officer to express his opinion on the 1976 date. By far the majority of officers supported the military continuing in office. Only a few officers were frank with Gowon. It is a pity that many of these officers, who sycophantically urged Gowon on, later turned round to say that they had advised Gowon to quit.<sup>20</sup> While there might have been other coup plots, the one which eventually overthrew Gowon had its beginnings after the Senior Officers' meeting. Let us follow the experiences of some of the officers involved in order to get a glimpse of some details of the plot.

A few days after the Senior Officers' meeting, Col A. Ochefu (Provost-Marshal of the Military Police) and Joseph Garba met in Garba's office and discussed the political situation in the country.

They raised the point that Gowon had destroyed himself by his defence of Gomwalk and his reluctance to change the governors. They saw themselves as possible targets who would eventually be destroyed together with Gowon. They then arrived at a decision that Gowon and his governors must be changed. They subsequently laid down two conditions for the coup, i) that Gowon should be made aware of the root causes, and ii) that it should be bloodless.

From this time on, Garba and Col Ochefu became active participants in the coup plot. Garba became a major co-ordinator and had the duty of contacting some Hausa-Fulani officers in the army 'who were known to be very keen in organizing for a change of government and that their co-operation would be readily available.'<sup>21</sup> Among the first persons to be contacted were, Shehu Yar'adua, Mohammed Buhari and Ibrahim Taiwo. Later Ibrahim Taiwo became an effective co-ordinator of the coup and the contact with Brigadiers Murtala and Yakubu Danjuma, both of whom later knew of the coup, did not actively participate in it, but promised not to do anything to stop it.<sup>22</sup>

In a short while the plan took on a great momentum. Members of the military intelligence, including the Director, Col Abdullahi Mohammed, participated effectively. Thus Gowon even lost his intelligence network in the barracks. The coup makers gave a number of false alarms to wear out the anxiety of the rulers. In addition, knowing that July 29 had been associated with many coups, the plotters conceived that nobody would expect reasonable officers to organize a coup on that same date. Normally, people do not expect a repeat action on the same date. Thus the false alarms were 'decoys' – to divert attention from July 29.

Interestingly Garba, though a very active participant, had to be watched twenty-four hours a day, just in case he changed his mind, since his bitterness had not really been with General Gowon. Garba's main quarrel had been with Mrs Victoria Gowon. Both General Gowon and his wife had played a very active role in convincing Alhaji Coomassie to give permission to Joseph Garba (a Christian) to marry his daughter. They were very embarrassed when this marriage turned out to be a disaster. It was understood that Victoria Gowon and Garba did not get along, partly because of this issue. The frictions between the two had been quoted at various times by Garba as the main reason for his participation in the coup. It may be added that Garba's ambitions were reliably understood to have got to a point where he could not continue to play second fiddle to Gowon. Although many senior officers had criticised Gowon for keeping Garba at Dodan Barracks throughout the period of the war, Gowon had stood his ground, and retained him as his guard commander. Those who knew Garba well, confirmed that Dodan Barracks was

getting too small for his ambitions, and thus the frictions with Gowon's wife provided a good excuse.

Garba's colleagues had actually taunted Garba for not being a good soldier. He had fought in no war and this reportedly agitated Garba who saw his ego being regularly deflated by his colleagues. Some of his colleagues believed that attempts by Garba to gain the limelight on occasions such as Gowon's birthday - when he rode in the same landrover with the General - were attempts at ego compensation. Similarly, a Garba who was said to be shy of the ultimate test of soldiering - war - found that he could prove that he was a good soldier. Who could be a better soldier than one who could plan and execute a military coup? The military coup was the height of Garba's ego compensation. From then on, he basked in popularity and the paraphernalia of conferences - a re-inflated ego.

For the other members of the group, this was very positively functional. Garba's alienation from Dodan Barracks (which he was expected to protect) was important in the calculation of the plotters. The participation of the Commander of the Brigade of Guards was necessary, not only for the success of the coup, but also for determining the nature of a coup, which was intended to be bloodless.

To return to the plot trail, the circle of officers who got to know about the coup got wider and wider even though the essential core remained intact, as they recruited their more trusted colleagues to carry out specific assignments. Officers, like George Innih got to know about it; he was reportedly scared that he would be arrested if he expressed an opinion that it was time for a coup. From available data, Mr S.K. Dimka, (the Deputy Commissioner of Police who was ironically later jailed in 1976 for the abortive Dimka coup) was informed of the impending change. The officer in I Division Army Headquarters who was to inform Brigadier Ibrahim Haruna misunderstood his role. He saw it as one of eliminating him in the course of the coup. He therefore made no effort to win him over.

The coup makers had, of course, agreed that no Brigadiers were to be brought into the execution of the coup, but they were to be won over. As late as 27th and 28th July attempts were being made to win over some of these Brigadiers. Brigadier Jallo was informed and later given the task of winning over Brigadiers Bissalla and Haruna. Col Isa Bukar had also been kept in the picture.

The execution of the plot was not without surprises which caused the plotters occasional hypertension. For example, on the night of 27 July, Col Taiwo had to rush to Jos to meet Col Ochefu (who had moved to Jos ostensibly to do a course in management, but essentially to watch situations from outside Lagos and tidy up the loose ends of the plot). Something unexpected and urgent had developed. There was a funny concentration of senior military officers in Kano for a polo tournament. Brigadiers Rotimi and Johnson, General Hassan

and others were there. It was felt this concentration could cause some confusion and that these people must be rounded up.

Incidentally, the Commander of the Brigade in Kano, Col Ejiga had not been told of the plot, yet he was the most likely person to effectively handle the situation. Ochefu then sent a message through Col Taiwo to secure Col Ejiga's co-operation. Col Ejiga's job was a tough one since he was not expected to act until after the radio broadcast on 29 July.

Meanwhile, a number of things had gone on at the Dodan Barracks residence of the Head of State. General Gowon had had intelligence reports about some of those involved in the coup. Prominent among these were the names Col Garba and Col Anthony Ochefu – both officers whom General Gowon depended upon for his security. Col Ochefu had been Gowon's ideal of a soldier, a tall, fearless and intelligent officer, who had improved himself tremendously, educationally and otherwise, over the years.

The General was very agitated by this report. He called Col Garba and asked him about the issue. Garba pledged his loyalty and denied being involved in the plot. Col Ochefu evaded numerous attempts by General Gowon to get him, including messages sent to his office and house. Col. Ochefu made himself unavailable. In the circumstances, Gowon, in his credulous way, believed that the gentlemen were innocent. Given the atmosphere of the time and the goings-on in the polity, Gowon wondered whether he was being set up. Again, both Garba and Ochefu were from the former Benue-Plateau State. Gowon found it funny that the security report only mentioned these two officers as the *main* actors.

Was he being encouraged to eliminate his two trusted aides so that his security could be left open and vulnerable to subsequent machinations to get him? These thoughts went through Gowon's mind. To confirm this, subsequent intelligence reports he got only mentioned Garba's name, and even claimed that Col Ochefu was trying to contain the coup plot and nip it in the bud. Thereafter, Gowon did not make any further attempts to see Ochefu since his confidence in the man had been confirmed by the report.

It would seem that the intelligence chaps in the military and the police had done a good job on Gowon's intelligence. Gowon, given his trust for Garba, would not easily believe that Garba would rise against him. His trust for Garba was confirmed by his instructions to Walbe, (much later) to get in touch with Garba if there was any trouble while he was away in Kampala. Garba had denied knowledge of the coup. The other coup makers, thus, had been insulated against official wrath. It may, however, be argued that if Gowon had been a ruthless ruler, he could have organized and found out the members of the group and eliminated them. But this he would not do – not even when faced with the realities of the situation.

But from April on, the Head of State knew that there were plotters to oust him. He kept these to himself. He did not mention these to his ADC as some officers do when experiencing a crisis of thoughts. He never gave any colleague of his the impression that he knew what was coming. Nor did he betray his worries to his close associates. Yet, he was really agitated within the period though he went about his work without the least evidence of worry. Victoria Gowon, his wife, was not even told of his feelings and knowledge of the coup plot. He probably feared that Victoria, an extrovert, might give his secret knowledge away.

Having ruled for nine years, Gowon believed that a coup could come anytime. He was very worried about the nature of the coup. In his usual way he hoped there would be no bloodshed. He was not ready to shed blood to stay in power, but he was also not psychologically prepared to accept the prospects of innocent people shedding blood while he made his exit. He left everything to God, and hoped that things would take their natural course. It must be admitted that Gowon's behaviour within this period proved beyond doubt that he was a solid soldier and humane statesman. With all the burdens of his knowledge of events, he did not give any sign of desperation. Some Heads of State would have gone schizophrenic and would have embarked on political witch-hunting of suspects. Gowon did not.

This was the situation when he planned his trip for the Organization of African Unity conference in Kampala. It was the one sole opportunity for which the plotters were waiting in order to make the change of government bloodless. Before Gowon's departure, M.D. Yusuf, the Police Officer in charge of intelligence, had reported that Col Garba was involved in a coup bid. Alhaji M.D. Yusuf had wanted to confront Garba himself. But General Gowon preferred to do so himself. He called Col Garba and bluntly put the question of his involvement in the suspected coup plot to him. That was Gowon's usual forthright self. But Garba denied knowledge of, or involvement in, any coup plot.

Gowon was not going to be dissuaded by any rumours of a coup attempt from performing his regular duties. So he told Garba; 'If you are plotting, let it be on your own conscience and let it be without bloodshed. I must go to Kampala anyway.'<sup>23</sup> Most African Heads of State would have cancelled their trip and grappled with the suspected coup plot, with a possible 'rolling of heads' in the process. Gowon would not do that in order to hold on to power. He had allowed his wife and son to travel to London (in company of his police ADC, Mr Yaroson) leaving his sisters-in-law and other relatives at Dodan Barracks.

On 27th of July, General Gowon left for Kampala. At the airport, General Gowon discovered that he had forgotten an important file in

a briefcase at the Dodan Barracks. According to his military ADC, Lt-Col Walbe, General Gowon had wanted him to get back to Dodan Barracks in order to collect the file before his flight to Kampala. But Admiral Wey had intervened claiming that in these sorts of formal trips, it would not be right, by protocol, to disrupt pre-arranged schedules. Since the aircraft was coming back to Nigeria the next day and returning to Kampala anyway, his ADC could come back and pick up the briefcase. Gowon reportedly agreed to this arrangement.<sup>24</sup>

On arrival in Kampala, he asked Walbe to go back to Lagos on the same day and collect the briefcase. Col Walbe claims that Gowon had asked him to say hello to Garba and had requested him to keep watch, and given the rumours, if there was anything like a coup, he should give support to Garba to contain it. Gowon then gave Walbe a letter to Admiral Wey, the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, to inform the latter that he (Gowon) had sent him back for the briefcase about which they had had discussion at Ikeja airport. Ironically, like in Ironsi's case, the very security officers in charge of the leader's security organization are the very source of the leader's insecurity. Garba was a coup maker against Gowon, and was not going to stop any coup attempt.

Col Walbe got to Entebbe to meet Captain Thahal and Captain Nnaji, the pilots of the executive jet of the Head of State. He found that Captain Nnaji was ill and had been advised by the doctor that it was not safe for him to fly until the next day. The aircraft also needed servicing and anyway Col Walbe had got back to Entebbe at about 8:00 p.m. – a bit too late to travel. Gowon was so informed and he gave permission for departure the next day, 28 July. The plane left Kampala at about 11:00 a.m. and arrived Lagos at about 3:00 p.m.

To Walbe's surprise the pilot was diverted to park near the airforce base by an airforce officer, Muktar Mohammed. The coup had, to all intents and purposes, taken place. Normally the executive jet parked on the VIP side.

The return of Walbe on 28th July represented another issue of anxiety for the coup makers. It does seem, by the sequence of events, that Muktar Mohammed or one of the sentries at Walbe's residence must have informed Garba that Walbe had returned to the country. It was clear that Garba and Ochefu were disturbed by this event – less than 24 hours in the countdown to the zero hour.

Col Garba phoned Col Walbe's house and found out, frustratingly, that he had gone for a game of tennis. Meanwhile, a very worried Garba had rushed to inform Col Ochefu that Walbe was back in town and had a letter for Admiral Wey. He even hinted to Col Ochefu that Walbe had sent people to the armoury to collect his (Walbe's) weapon.

By the time Garba phoned again, Walbe was at home. Garba

and withdrew. Thereafter, the core – Garba, Ochefu, Yar'adua, Muktar, Aduloju and Mohammed – withdrew into Dodan Barracks (taking Walbe along with them) confident that Garba's boys could be used.

At the meeting, it was agreed that Brigadier Martin Adamu should read the broadcast speech announcing the coup. Adamu was acting as Chief of Army Staff and as such was in effect General Officer Commanding (GOC) the Nigerian Army. An announcement from him would automatically create an impression that the change was an army organized scheme. Col Ochefu had the duty of making Adamu do this. He took Yar'adua along with him to Adamu's house after midnight. But Adamu refused to do such a thing and advised the officers to give Gowon another chance, and that Gowon would change. The two officers repeated their call in order to persuade Adamu to announce the coup. This time Martin Adamu not only refused, but came downstairs in his pyjamas to plead with the plotters to avoid bloodshed. He was, of course, reminded that his refusal could cause bloodshed.

The officers then went to the Dodan Barracks, and at about 4:00 a.m. scribbled a statement that had been agreed upon, for Col Garba to read out. The choice of Col Garba was also strategic. Since not every officer knew about the coup plot, the first troop reaction after the announcement would be from the Brigade of Guards at the Dodan Barracks. The name and the voice of their commander would have a mollifying effect on them. In addition, Garba was to make the announcement and walk right back into Dodan Barracks. Other officers around the country who knew Garba's close relations with Gowon, would hesitate before reacting. Thus, Garba was a very crucial actor to the plotters. Any stubbornness or change of mind on his part would have led to a disaster, and perhaps bloodshed.

As soon as it was clear that the coup had actually taken place and that the new group was in effective control, Lt-Col Walbe was allowed to go home.

Walbe certainly was not part of the coup plotters. In fact, his return created anxiety among the plotters. The plotters, however, kept Brigadier Godwin Ally, the Commander of the Lagos Garrison Organization, in the dark. When he learnt about the coup in the early morning of July 29th, he was reported to have literally wept. He could not see why troops under his command should revolt against their Commander-in-Chief, without his knowledge. The plotters probably did not trust that he would 'play ball' with them. It is reliably learnt that this incident made Ally lose confidence in the army and he later retired voluntarily.

After the announcement of the coup, reports were received from various locations. The crowd of officers which had converged in Kano was

now effectively under Col Ejiga's surveillance. Muktar (in company of Dan Suleiman and Wushishi) flew a plane to Kano to bring this group of very senior army officers and some military governors to Lagos. The coup had basically been effected.

In his broadcast over Lagos radio, Col Garba announced that in view of events in the past few months:

the Nigerian Armed Forces have decided to effect a change of leadership of the Federal Military Government, and from now General Yakubu Gowon ceases to be Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.<sup>26</sup>

He then went on to warn that the change had so far been bloodless and since 'we do not want anyone to lose his or her life', people should be law-abiding, 'in their own interest'.

The next issue was one of choosing a new leadership. The group of senior officers, brigadier and above, had been kept out of active participation in the coup, but now leadership fell on them – especially Brigadiers Danjuma, Obasanjo and Murtala Mohammed. The young colonels had agreed among themselves that none of those who participated in the coup should be beneficiaries. This was later to be overridden to the chagrin of some of them. The initial intention of the coup makers was for the three officers named above to share power in a council – a form of political troika at the centre. It had been initially agreed that Danjuma should be Head of State, a position he refused. It then fell on Murtala Mohammed and Obasanjo.

It was learnt from a very reliable inner source that Murtala had insisted on a one-man rule, while the coup-makers had insisted on their original idea of shared power. There were a number of reasons for this shared power idea. The first was that Gowon had been over-burdened by the multi-faceted demands on his capability and time. A head of government who shared his administrative functions with the Chief of Supreme Military Headquarters and a Chief of Army Staff, was likely to cope more effectively with the issues. The second reason was that the group did not want to make a mistake of trusting 'a government to a bulldozer who would spend millions of naira without authority'.<sup>27</sup>

In the long-run there were interventions by Danjuma and others. The position accepted was that Danjuma was to be Chief of Army Staff, while Murtala and Obasanjo were to share administrative powers. The former was to be Head of State while the latter was to be Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters. All officers of the rank of General were to be retired together with the head of the armed services. Thus a new government came into force, marking the end of a coup effectively co-ordinated by Col Taiwo and his colleagues.

In his broadcast of July 30, 1975, the new Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Brigadier Murtala Mohammed, recalled the past few years and how 'the government has not been able to fulfil the legitimate expectations of our people'.<sup>28</sup> He pointed out that:

Nigeria has been left to drift. This situation, if not arrested, would inevitably have resulted in chaos and even bloodshed. . . . The armed forces having examined the situation, came to the conclusion that certain changes were inevitable.<sup>29</sup>

The new leader went further to analyze the weaknesses of his predecessor.

After the Civil War, the affairs of the State, hitherto a collective responsibility, became characterized by lack of consultation, indecision, indiscipline and, even, neglect. Indeed the public at large became disillusioned and disappointed by these developments. This trend was clearly incompatible with the philosophy and image of a corrective regime. Unknown to the general public, the feeling of disillusion was also evident among members of the armed forces whose administration was neglected, but, who, out of sheer loyalty to the Nation, and in the hope that there would be a change, continued to suffer in silence. Things got to a stage where the head of administration became virtually inaccessible even to official advisers; and when advice was rendered, it was often ignored. Responsible opinion, including advice by eminent Nigerians, traditional rulers, intellectuals, etc, was similarly discarded. The leadership, either by design or default, had become too insensitive to the true feelings and yearnings of the people. The nation was thus being plunged inexorably into chaos.<sup>30</sup>

In the light of above issues, the armed forces, he announced, took a number of decisions, to grant the nation 'a new lease of life . . .' General Gowon was removed as Head of Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces; and was retired from the Armed Forces 'in his present rank of General with full benefits, in recognition of his past services to the Nation.'<sup>31</sup> Gowon was free to return to the country when conditions permitted and was free to pursue any legitimate undertaking. His personal safety and those of his family would be guaranteed.

A number of officers were retired – Vice-Admiral J.E.A. Wey (Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters); Major-General Hassan Katsina (Deputy Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters); Major-General David Ejoor (Chief of Staff, Army); Rear-Admiral Nelson Soroh

(Chief of Naval Staff); and Brigadier E. E. Ikwue (Chief of Air Staff); as well as all officers of the rank of Major-General or its equivalent and above.

The Inspector-General of Police, Alhaji Kam Salem and his deputy, Chief T. A. Fagbola, were also retired. All governors and the Administrator of East Central State were relieved of their posts and retired.

Brigadier Mohammed then proceeded to announce new appointments. The new service chiefs were – Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo (Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters); Brigadier T. Y. Danjuma (Chief of Army Staff); Col John Yisa Doko (Chief of Air Staff); Commodore Adelanwa (Chief of Naval Staff); Mr M. D. Yusuf (Inspector-General of Police).

Twelve new governors for the states were appointed<sup>32</sup> and a new government structure comprising i) the Supreme Military Council<sup>33</sup> ii) the National Council of States<sup>34</sup> and iii) the Federal Executive Council<sup>35</sup> were also announced. The regime promised to review the political programme, and to set up a panel to investigate the questions of new states and another to advise on the issue of a new federal capital. The 1973 population census was cancelled, and the World Black Festival was postponed. Also postponed was the visit of the Queen of England. A panel to advise on the future of ICSA and ESIALA was to be set up.

At the end of his broadcast Brigadier Mohammed called on Nigerians to make sacrifices for the nation, warning that 'This Government will *not* tolerate indiscipline. This Government will *not* condone abuse of office.'<sup>36</sup>

Thus the curtains fell on General Gowon and his colleagues in government. Like Gowon said himself, he had played his part and had made his exit. A new set of dramatis personæ had arrived on the political stage. Whatever one may say of the situation, Gowon's exit was graceful. He made an exit as a gentleman, as a soldier-statesman, and as a principled person. He refused to be goaded into taking action to eliminate those whom he knew were going to overthrow him. As he later put it:

I did not act because I didn't want heads to roll. . . . Having sensed the plan, the only means I could have employed to stay in power was to have ordered for many heads to roll. But I preferred pleading guilty to the oft-repeated charge of weakness to being a murderer. That was what I was not prepared to do for the mere craving to remain in office.<sup>37</sup>

Gowon was not one to walk rough-shod over skulls of his colleagues in order to remain in power. By his mere temperament and

make-up, Gowon could not have done it. His performances in Kampala not only confirmed this, but also heightened his respectability in the international arena. It is to this new chapter in Gowon's life that we shall now turn – the chapter of 'citizen Gowon'.

## Notes

- 1 Shakespeare's, *As You Like It* quoted by Gowon in Kampala, Uganda, after news of the coup against his government and his subsequent overthrow
- 2 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Faith In Unity, op. cit.*, p. 179
- 3 See *Sunday Times*, 16 March, 1975, p. 16; and *Daily Times*, March 20, 1975, p. 1 Gowon
- 4 In his address to the newly appointed Federal Commissioner in January 1975, Gowon said:

I need hardly say that there is evidence about some ill-motivated elements in the country wanting to use the genuine demands but more often the unfounded or misinformed complaints of workers in public and private sector to precipitate a paralysis of government authority.

The honest attempts of government to better the lot of its workers are being deliberately misinterpreted, and efforts have been made to whip up the feelings of one sector of the public service against the other.

Outrageously false salary scales have been printed and circulated as having been approved for members of the armed forces. The intention behind all these is obvious, but we have refused to be goaded by such subversive acts to taking the action that most people consider obvious but which we know will lead to the innocent getting hurt while the real culprits take cover.

I will say no more at this stage than to serve notice that there is a limit to what any responsible government can tolerate in the face of a calculated plan to disrupt the orderly progress of our nation.

*Daily Times*, January 30, 1975, p. 11

- 5 *West Africa*, 19 November, 1971, p. 1369
- 6 *West Africa*, 13 November, 1972, p. 1545
- 7 *New Nigerian*, 29 November, 1973, p. 24
- 8 Interview, General Gowon
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.* A lengthy quote from the author's interview with Gowon will allow us a glimpse at the workings of his mind:

... And I did not change the governors for a number of reasons. I did promise to change them sometime in June or July. Now some people were clamouring that one should change them in April when the budget was going on, when we were really planning the five-year development plan. These were the people who had been with me for these years and we had started the second plan with them and worked hard on the third plan and I thought it was reasonable that we should complete the plan before they were changed. But after that I said they had to start off the plan. Whatever it is, I had never liked to change people when children were still at school. So as you can see, it was

the consideration for welfare of the officers and governors concerned and their families moving to new homes, their children moving to new schools that I said we will do it during the long holidays . . . between June and say August 1975 . . . Then you know the plan for the Queen's visit at this stage was certainly materialising . . . This was to have been about mid-October to about the end of October and I said it was a very important visit. You know I had been to Britain on a state visit in 1973 and we were well received and relations between Nigeria and Britain certainly were very, very good. Honestly, I thought that after such a great welcome (which is also a great respect for Nigeria) we should also show the Queen how well we thought of her and should be able to receive the Queen. So I said, alright, we must not allow anything to go wrong with that particular visit, and if that is the case, it is better to have the people that are there at the moment, who know the strings, so that should anything go wrong, at least, they will be able to put things right.

. . . The other reason was that we had a Festival of Arts and Culture taking place in November to December, and I said again, for the same reason that I gave about the Queen's visit, that it was such an important thing that one needed people who had got the experience, who knew where the right things were, and they should be able to place their hands on those things at the appropriate moments. And in case anything happened they were in a position to get at the problem so that the Festival could be a success and increase the image of Nigeria in the world and also [the] image of Africans . . . So we wanted it to be a great success and we did not want anything to go wrong and for that reason I thought the people who knew the problems involved, the people who had been with me, who had been along with me all the time preparing this festival, should help me see it successfully carried out before they left . . .

12 Interview: Gowon

13 A former Permanent Secretary under Gowon, and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Dr Edwin Ogbu observed:

I think he is a fine Christian fellow, but his desire not to displease anybody made him to please nobody, because sometimes he tended to make things take their course by not acting. In fact, on more than one occasion, I told him that he should have been a priest instead of soldier.

in *The Rock* (Jos), No. 11, (July-August, 1977)

14 *Daily Times*, January 30, 1975, p. 11

15 Gowon had this to say:

Decisions were taken quickly too. For example, the appointment of Mr Odor as General Manager of the refinery at Port Harcourt. This decision has since been cancelled by the Mohammed regime which claimed that I took decisions against the advice of the council. The truth was that I believed a decision had to be taken. We had left it too long. I believed the Civil War had been left behind and if Mr Odor was the best qualified, then he must be chosen. There was opposition to Mr Odor's appointment based on the allegations that he sabotaged the refinery at Port Harcourt in order to deny the Federal Military Government the use of the oil during the war. There was therefore a campaign of vilification against him. As far as I was concerned, . . . I only wanted the best qualified Nigerian. After all, many of Mr Odor's critics were pushing for their own candidates. I believed the best man should get the job and I gave it to him. Yet I am being accused of indecision. Any decisions that I have taken, I have never been afraid to put them in writing so that they can be checked. My copies of memos were collected (at the end of each meeting) by the

Secretary to the Federal Military Government (SFMG) and used as copies to verify decisions taken by the Council I was not afraid to take decisions e.g. in the Lockheed case, ask Brigadier E. Ikwue.

16 Interview, with Colonel Anthony Ochefu, one of the star actors in the July 1975 coup.

17 His Military ADC said:

I have in my house a film which I did personally on Abuja, the proposed capital. Abuja was General Gowon's first choice. He had been there during his holiday in Jos. He, the late Gomwalk and I, went on a helicopter tour to Kafanchan area and then to Abuja. Then he decided that Abuja was the most likely place as Federal Capital if decision was to be made. I filmed it with people and I have got that film with me.

18 For some of those who participated in the coup against Gowon both group and individual reasons could be proffered. Generally there were a number of broad reasons:

- i ambitions of individuals who saw Gowon as a big shadow to be removed before the rays of the sun could find them and subsequently shine on them; and for this group even if Gowon had kept his promise to leave the political arena by 1976, he was still qualified to be overthrown. The reasons would have included Gowon's attempt to run away from the mess he had created for others to sort out. The Jerry Rawlings coup in Ghana came only a few months from the date of expected military withdrawal from the political arena.
- ii those who were close to Gowon and yet genuinely felt that after nine years, Gowon had begun to hear different sounds from the popular one, and had therefore lost touch with the pulse of society; for these people, Gowon should be talked to or changed so that they (as identifiable associates of Gowon) did not become targets of coups by other disgruntled groups in the army.
- iii frustrated individuals whose names had been peddled or rumoured as prospective governors, but found that these were not going to materialise with Gowon's unwillingness to change governors.
- iv individual soldiers who had acquaintance with politicians, and who through influences of the latter had begun to see Gowon through more parochial perceptual prisms than they had before.
- v senior officers who were genuinely frustrated by Gowon's 'unmilitary' vacillation on issues; and who became convinced that only a graceful, bloodless change of leadership could help protect Gowon's image and redeem the nation.
- vi those who for personal reasons of sour relations with some members of the Gowon nuclear family or other top military colleagues in Gowon's government, wanted to see all of them go.
- vii those who strongly and genuinely felt the military should return to the barracks, and leave civilians to their political mess; and thus wrongly or rightly saw Gowon as edging towards an indefinite stay in office, and saw this as offensive to their better judgement.

19 This was why at the training conference in Kaduna in the early part (May?) of 1974, officers in government tried to point out that Murtala had recklessly incurred an unauthorized expenditure of ₦ 9 million in the Signals Corp alone. Murtala was not at the conference but had written a lengthy defence of his action which he circulated to all those who were at that conference. As a participant told the writer, 'The point was that it was strongly being suspected in government that

a . . . chque . . . was planning a coup and that someone was getting government funds to sustain arrangements for its success. It was felt that . . . Senior officers should know that the government knew ' Col Ibrahim Taiwo had been accused of planning a coup earlier, he was subsequently investigated and transferred to Port Harcourt

- 20 Interviews of many senior army officers who attended the Senior Officers Meeting showed that Gowon was very democratic in his handling of conferences. Gowon was reported to have asked each officer to express his opinion. Most of the opinions expressed were in favour of continuation of military rule after 1976. Most of the officers present suggested extension of military rule, given the political tensions in the country. A few officers including Brigadier (later General) Olu-leye, opposed the extension, and if there must be extension, stressed that a date indicating probable return to civilian rule should be stated. The minutes of this meeting stated it very clearly that the majority decision was for extension beyond 1976. It is a pity that many of the officers were not honest with Gowon; some probably felt they would court Gowon's anger by speaking their mind. Those who were honest in their opinion did not court Gowon's anger. It is ironic that many of these soldiers who assented to extension of military rule were the same ones who later turned round to say they opposed extension of military rule beyond 1976. There is no evidence that General (then Brigadier) Danjuma expressed any opinion against extension of military rule. All officers interviewed confirmed that Danjuma supported the extension and even stressed that the military, like politicians, had a right to rule. This contradicts the opinion expressed in Lindsay Barrett's book that General Danjuma opposed military rule after 1976 and said so at the meeting. So also was there no evidence that General (then Col) Garba opposed extended army rule. Thus the decision to extend army rule was not Gowon's, but the army's. But as Commander-in-Chief, Gowon was ultimately responsible for the decision.
- Interview?
- 22 See Lindsay Barrett, *Danjuma, The Making of a General op. cit.*, pp. 77-81 for an account of how Garba and Taiwo contacted him and how he reacted on the phone to Garba. 'Make sure there is no bloodshed. Let me make this clear that I will do nothing to stop you, but I will not join you.' Garba was reported to have retorted: 'Sir, we do not need your help, all that we want is for you to do nothing.'
- 23 *The Times*, (London) July 30, 1975, p. 4 and see also *West Africa*, 4 August, 1975, p. 912
- 24 It has been reliably confirmed that the briefcase story was merely a cover. Gowon had actually sent a message to Wey, through Walbe, that should there be any problem, he should send Walbe back to Kampala so that he could return to Nigeria immediately. According to Gowon, Walbe was not to be seen while in Lagos, but he was said to have gone to play tennis at Dodan Barracks and his presence was known to many.
- 25 The contents of this letter were quite normal, nothing to excite uneasiness among the coup makers. It is reproduced below:

Just to let you know that we arrived safely and we had a good journey right through and we also had a great welcome from Field Marshall Idi who was openly delighted to see us

I forgot my briefcase and I am sending back William to fetch it. If you therefore have any message please send it through him.

My regards to all other colleagues.

Yours Aye,  
Y. Gowon  
(Signed)

This letter was written on *East African Airways* letter head.

- 26 *West Africa* 4th August, 1975. p. 912  
 27 Interview: also see, Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 81  
 28 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Drift and Chaos Arrested: Text of First Broadcast to the Nation by His Excellency Brigadier Murtala Mohammed, HFMG and C-in-C of the Armed Forces*, July 30, 1975, (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, n.d.), p. 5  
 29 *Ibid.*, p. 5  
 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6 As *West Africa* magazine (4 August, 1974, p. 887) commented: 'But it was generally believed that General Gowon still retained a remarkable modesty and ability to listen to others. Brigadier Mohammed's picture of his predecessor must be accepted as a true one, it is sadly different from the one which had for so long been accepted.'  
 31 *Ibid.*, p. 6  
 32 The new Military Governors were.

1. Benue-Plateau	Col Abdullahi Mohammed
2. East-Central	Col Anthony Ochefu
3. Kano	Lt-Col Sani Bello
4. Kwara	Col Ibrahim Taiwo
5. Lagos	Captain Lawal (NN)
6. Midwest	Col George Innih
7. North-Central	Lt-Col Usman Jibrin
8. North-East	Lt-Col Mohammed Buhari
9. North-West	Lt-Col Umaru Mohammed
10. Rivers	Lt-Col Zamani Lekwot
11. South-East	Lt-Col Paul Omu
12. Western	Captain Akin Aduwo (NN)

*Ibid.*, (pp. 8-9)

33 The Supreme Military Council as reconstituted comprised:

1. The Head of State
2. Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters
3. Chief of Army Staff
4. Chief of Naval Staff
5. Chief of Air Staff
6. Inspector-General of Police
7. GOC — 1st Division — Brigadier J.A. Akinrinade
8. GOC — 2nd Division — Brigadier Martin Adamu
9. GOC — 3rd Division — Brigadier Emmanuel Abisoye
10. Lagos Garrison Organization, Brigadier John Obada
11. Col Joseph Garba
12. Lt-Col Shehu Yar'adua
13. Brigadier James Oluleye
14. Brigadier Iliya Bisalla
15. Col Ibrahim Babangida
16. Lt-Col Muktar Mohammed
17. Col Dan Suleiman
18. Captain Olufemi Olumide (NN)
19. Captain H. Husami Abdullahi (NN)
20. Mr Adamu Suleiman, Commissioner of Police
21. Lt-Col Alfred Aduloju
22. Lt-Commander Godwin Kanu (NN)

- 34 The National Council of State provided a forum for state governors to meet one another and the Federal Government. They were no longer members of the SMC and actually reported to the office of the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters.
- 35 All Civil Commissioners in the Federal Executive Council were relieved of their posts and new appointments to this council were promised. See *Daily Times*, August 7, 1975 p. 1, for names of the new Commissioners.
- 36 *Drift and Chaos Arrested*, op. cit., p. 11
- 37 *Sunday Times*, August 10, 1975, p. 1

## Chapter 14

# Lagos to London through Kampala

... And one man in his time plays many parts.<sup>1</sup>

For Nigerians, Kampala has a very significant position in its history. In May 1966 Kampala hosted a conference for peace talks on the Nigerian Civil War. At that conference, the leader of the Nigerian delegation, Chief Anthony Enahoro, opined that the names of Obote and Kampala would 'hold an honoured place in the history of reunited Nigeria'. During that conference too, Nigeria lost one of her confidential secretaries, Mr Johnson Banjo. From then on the name Kampala became well known in Nigeria. In fact, Kampala attained new suffixes after the death of Mr Banjo. It was popularly referred to as 'Kampala Kills', or 'Kampala which kills'.

In accordance with Enahoro's observation, Kampala was to play yet another role in Nigeria's history. General Gowon was overthrown while he was in Kampala attending an OAU conference. Certainly, Kampala attained a new place in Nigeria's history, even if this time, it was without Obote. Ironically, if Obote was overthrown by General Idi Amin because of his absence from Kampala, Gowon was overthrown in Lagos because of his presence in Kampala. From Nkrumah's experience, it became a practice to overthrow a powerful head of state while he was away from the capital of his country, especially, if minimum violence was to be used. If Obote was overthrown while he was attending the Commonwealth Conference in Singapore, Gowon was similarly overthrown while attending an OAU meeting in Kampala.

Ironically, it was a conference of OAU (a body which Gowon had chaired in 1973-74) that provided a forum which saw his fall from political glory. Unlike Obote and his rantings in 1971, Gowon's reaction to the coup was gentle, statesmanlike and dignified. Gowon displayed a rare combination of military courage and statesmanship throughout this period of tension when other people in his position would have lost their equanimity and sense of bearing. Let us take a look at events which ended Gowon's trip from Lagos via Kampala to London.

Gowon had left Lagos on 27 July, 1975 to attend the OAU meeting of Heads of States. Among members of his delegation were Dr Okoi Arikpo, (the Federal Commissioner for External Affairs), Mr Joe Iyalla, Mr Hamzat Ahmadu, and Governor Usman Faruk of the former North-Western State. In this delegation were Alhaji Gambo (of the Special Branch) and Lt-Col Mustapha Amin of the Nigerian Air Force. Gowon arrived the same day and sent Lt-Col Walbe back to Lagos, ostensibly to pick up a briefcase, but actually to take a message to Admiral Wey that should there be any problems, the latter should send Walbe back with the aircraft to enable him (Gowon) to return to Nigeria immediately.

On the 28th of July, 1975, General Gowon gave a keynote address which set the tone for the conference. The title of his address was 'The Unity of Africa'. This title was very apt as many African states had wanted to boycott the conference in Kampala. Nigeria had actually worked very hard to convince many member states to attend. In this speech, Gowon advised the four new members admitted into the OAU to give their 'people good government and uplift Africa and mankind'.<sup>2</sup> He appealed to members to unite and work together for the unity and progress of Africa.

Later, on the same day, General Gowon held meetings with other African Heads of State. He also had a long session with the Nigerian delegation in order to get properly briefed.

The events of the fateful day of 29 July, 1975 were quite interesting. On the way to the conference hall in the morning, the General was accosted by General Mobutu of Zaire, who pleaded that both of them should discuss some problems affecting Africa, especially the Angolan crisis in which Mobutu was seeking Nigeria's support. The discussion lasted thirty minutes and thereafter Gowon proceeded to the conference hall.

At the conference hall, Mr Mbow of Senegal (the head of UNESCO) was addressing the Organization under the chairmanship of General Idi Amin. On Gowon's entry, Amin called him to the high table and showed him a piece of paper on which something had been scribbled. The content of the paper was to the effect that there had been a coup in Nigeria and that General Gowon had ceased to be the Head of State. General Amin then turned to General Gowon and inquired what was happening. Gowon retorted that he had not heard any news that there was a change of government. However, he hoped that with time, the situation would become clearer. He believed that no coup would succeed without the co-operation of the Brigade of Guards. Ironically he believed that the Brigade of Guards was loyal to him and that they would do everything to quell a coup, should one occur.

Gowon then left Idi Amin's table and took his seat on the floor. As he sat quietly, without any show of emotion, listening to Mr Mbow's

speech, he was swarmed by press photographers who took several pictures of him.

Without giving out any obvious emotional reaction to the news he had just received, General Gowon turned to Alhaji Usman Faruk and said in Hausa, 'Abinde mu ka jin soro, ya faru agida', (What we have been afraid of at home, has happened.) The meaning of Gowon's statement did not dawn on Alhaji Faruk and Gowon had to repeat the statement before the former understood. Faruk was most disappointed and this was betrayed immediately by the change in his countenance. Gowon had to console Faruk and told him, 'I have a clear conscience. There is nothing to worry about.'<sup>3</sup>

Later, Alhaji Ahmadu Ahidjou of Cameroon requested to see General Gowon. The leaders met and had discussions. Ahidjo and wanted to know what had happened in Nigeria. Gowon said he did not have any details but understood that Brigadier Murtala Mohammed and Col Joseph Garba were mentioned. Ahidjo then wondered whether, in Gowon's opinion, Garba would be involved in a coup against him. General Gowon sincerely did not know. But he knew one thing — that a coup against him could only succeed if the Brigade of Guards was involved.

President Ahidjou was so emotionally moved that he was virtually in tears. Again, it was Gowon who had to console him and assured him that whoever was in power in Nigeria would maintain the cordial relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon. After these discussions, both leaders went back to the hall. At the end of the morning session, Gowon retired to his accommodation at the Nile Hotel.

General Gowon remembered vividly the role that two officials in his delegation — Alhaji Mohammed Gambo of the Special Branch and Lt-Col Mustapha Amin of the Air Force — played in Kampala. Gowon got the impression that these two men were the 'look-out men' for the coup plotters because they did everything to ensure that General Gowon was not out of sight. Mr Gambo even tried to keep people away from General Gowon — an action Gowon believed was aimed at keeping him in check. It came to a point when General Gowon had to tell the two officers off, and later that afternoon went to play squash at Makerere University. However Alhaji Gambo denies the allegation that he was a 'look-out man' for the coup makers. He claims that he was genuinely worried about Gowon's situation and the pressures under which Gowon found himself. All he attempted in Kampala, he emphasized, was to do his best to make situations more tolerable for Gowon and to help him make a graceful exit from Kampala to his new place of domicile — that is, wherever he eventually chose to go.

Generally, by all media accounts, General Gowon behaved in a very astonishing fashion. He was calm and collected and did not show

any signs that something dramatic had happened to him and his country. Meanwhile other heads of state visited Gowon to console him. But Gowon assured them that there was nothing to console him about, and that whatever government was in power in Nigeria, would continue to demonstrate Nigeria's interest in the affairs of the OAU. Among such heads of state who visited him were, Idi Amin, Nimeiri of Sudan and the then Head of State of Ethiopia. General Gowon even at the height of his political misfortune seized the opportunity to advise General Andom not to let any harm come to Emperor Haile Selassie and that the old man should be treated with the greatest respect and dignity. Gowon also had frank discussions with other Heads of State.

Within about forty-eight hours of the coup (i.e. 30th July, 1975) the names of the members of the Supreme Military Council were released. When General Gowon saw the list of officers, he shook his head in disbelief. It was then that he realized that the coup was more widespread than he had thought. He was surprised that it included some of the officers in whom he reposed greatest trust, for example, Col Garba, Col Yar'adua, Brigadier Danjuma and others. Gowon was convinced that for them to be appointed into the SMC, they must have known or taken part in the coup. He was right. But Gowon had always believed that these same officers would act against any coup staged against him.

General Gowon was not ready to fight to come back to power. Nigeria could not afford another bloodbath and he would not kill to get back on to a seat which, after all, he had occupied for nine years. Yet his silence could also create problems, especially since there were many officers he also trusted whose names were not mentioned. There might be a counter-attack which could lead subsequently to a bloodbath. He decided that while accepting the *fait-accomplis* it was necessary to address the press.

In his usually decent form, Gowon's bow out of the political stage was dignified. In his press conference, which he punctuated with humorous lines, Gowon, in a prepared statement, said:

From all indications a new government has been established in Nigeria. I wish to state that I on my part have also accepted the change and pledge my full loyalty to my nation, my country and the new government. Therefore, in the overall interest of the nation and our beloved country, I appeal to all concerned to cooperate fully with the new government and ensure the preservation of peace, unity and stability of our dear motherland.

As a Nigerian, I am prepared to serve my country in any capacity which my country may consider appropriate. I am a

professional soldier and I can do any duty that I am called upon to do.

May I take this opportunity to thank all the people of Nigeria and friends of Nigeria for the support and cooperation that you all gave me during my tenure of office and call upon all of you to give the new government of our nation the same support and cooperation in the interest of our beloved country.

Long live one united, happy and prosperous Nigeria. Long live the Organization of African Unity. May God bless you all.<sup>4</sup>

By many accounts, including those of Mr Theo Ola of Nigeria's *Sunday Times*, Nicholas Ashfield of *The Times* of London, and *West Africa*, General Gowon's address drew overwhelming applause from his audience, the pressmen. It was not usual for a deposed head of state to make a compulsory exit on such a philosophical and statesmanlike note. It was clear that Gowon's concern was for peace and stability of Nigeria.

Even more impressive was Gowon's ability to retain his sense of humour. For example, when pressmen wanted to ask him questions he politely declined and added, 'I wish you all the best of luck but please pray and look after Nigeria for me. We will next meet as private citizen Gowon'.<sup>5</sup> Mr Theo Ola of Nigeria's *Sunday Times* has a very moving account of Gowon's address to members of the Nigerian press, when Gowon cracked jokes about how he had also joined the club of 'ex-this and ex-that', a notable Asika line during Gowon's administration.

In another account by Mr Ola,<sup>6</sup> Gowon was quite satisfied with his lot. As we discussed in the last chapter, he had refrained from making the heads of his aides roll in order to stay in power. He had told the Nigerian press that he did not know what to aspire to any more in the Nigerian State. As a young officer, he aimed at reaching the top. He not only became a General, but became Nigeria's Head of State. He expressed his gratitude to Nigerians for the support they gave him for nine years. He would have returned to Nigeria immediately, except for the fact that he would not allow false people to use 'his presence to cause disquiet so that innocent blood could flow.' However, he was in touch with his successors, and promised to inform them of his plans. Gowon promised to return home as soon as the federal authorities gave him a green light to do so. On his return, Gowon affirmed, he would lead the life of a private citizen; 'I will visit friends, eat and drink with them so far as they don't discuss politics and women while in their company . . . because such is the practice in the military mess.'<sup>7</sup>

Gowon's dignified exit puzzled Nigerians and expatriates alike. Some of the coup-makers who knew him well, confirmed that they

had predicted his reaction and only hoped that his aides in Kampala did not influence him in other directions. A few illustrations of reactions to Gowon's exit may be pertinent at this point.

*The Times* of London reporter in Kampala filed a report to London on 30 July, 1975 which included these lines:

General Yakubu Gowon, the deposed Nigerian leader, today acknowledged his overthrow with all the dignity and galantry expected of a soldier-statesman . . . His last exit was an impressive display of the statesmanlike qualities he had often demonstrated during his nine-year leadership in Nigeria. Smiling broadly and looking immaculate in a blue and white agbada (robe), he made it abundantly clear that his primary objective was to preserve peace and stability in his country where memories of the Civil War are still fresh.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Gowon's manner of exit even lent credence to another story in the western world, that he knew about the coup and 'had reached a gentlemen's agreement with the leaders that it should take place while he was out of the country in order to avoid bloodshed.'<sup>9</sup>

*West Africa* magazine observed that, 'Nothing perhaps has become General Gowon in his public career so much as the manner of his leaving it.'<sup>10</sup> The *San Francisco Chronicle*, after hinting at the usual western analysis of African conflicts as tribal in causation, went on to state that there were allegations of corruption in Gowon's regime, but that 'Gowon himself retained a "Mr Clean" image. He and his wife lived simply, and he was seldom charged with profiteering.'<sup>11</sup>

In Nigeria, as expected, the same voices which cheered Gowon on his way to Kampala, ran him down to the dust. Gowon's services were all forgotten and his nine-year rule were referred to by some newspapers as nine years of failure. In fairness to them, a few newspapers were balanced in their accounts. As an illustration, Nigeria's *Daily Times* traced the cracks in Gowon's regime to twelve months before his fall. It also described Gowon as 'a sincere and well-meaning man' who had rendered services to the nation. But it ended by suggesting that 'power is delightful and absolute power is absolutely delightful.'<sup>12</sup> One lesson which came out very clearly from the Gowon experience is that cheers from crowds and flattery are not good thermometers for gauging the temperature of a polity or of popular support.

After the press conference, General Gowon sat down to think about what he should do in the circumstance. He could not return immediately given General Murtala Mohammed's statement that General Gowon could return to Nigeria at a mutually agreed future date. Most African Heads of State had offered him shelter, including

General Amin who invited him to stay in Uganda as long as he wanted. Of the various offers, Cameroon and Togo were closest to his heart as possible countries in which he could reside. General Gowon also recalled that if Hamani Diori of Niger were still in power, he would have preferred to settle down in Niger. On balance he preferred Togo to Cameroon because it was not too far from home. But General Gowon had no intention whatsoever of living in either the North, East or South Africa, or any other part of Africa, except West Africa. He resolved to go to Lome, Togo.

In order to establish a basis of confidence between himself and the Government of Nigeria, Gowon sent a message to Lagos that he was going to Lome and Lagos replied that this was okay.

On 29th July 1975, the ninth anniversary of the coup which had brought Gowon to power in 1966, he was overthrown. On August 1st, 1975, the ninth anniversary of his actual assumption of power as head of state, Gowon was on his way out of Kampala en-route to a new destination and a new life.

Before he left for Lome, General Gowon addressed members of the Nigerian delegation and the staff of the High Commission in Kampala. Gowon had run out of money and members of the delegation and High Commission staff decided to contribute part of their own *per diem* allowance which came to a total of about three thousand pounds sterling (£3,000). This they handed over to Gowon to begin a new life. It was a very touching scene and most members of the Nigerian delegation were in tears. General Gowon himself had to fight back tears from his eyes.

Gowon remembers, vividly and humorously, that one reporter – Mr Yakubu Abdul Azeez of the *Herald* newspaper (who had accompanied the delegation) had cried most and loudest, and was the same one who, when he got back to Nigeria, published in his newspaper that General Gowon was in tears.

After meeting the Nigerian delegation, President Amin gave Gowon his personal plane to fly him (Gowon) to Lome. On his way to Lome, General Gowon stopped at Garuwa to see President Ahidjo and explained to Ahidjou why he had to go to Togo instead of Cameroon. He told Ahidjou that he would want to join his family later in London, and since there was a direct flight from Accra to London, Lome provided greater travelling convenience given the situation in which he had found himself. From Garuwa he flew into Nigerian air space. While in Nigerian air space he decided to send a short message to General Mohammed, something to the effect; 'As I am over-flying Nigeria to Lome, Togo, a country that will be my base for some time, I want again to affirm my loyalty and to wish you and your government well.' From the tower someone sent a message back; 'All of us here wish you well and give you our best wishes.'

her family from the official residence of General Gowon.<sup>13</sup> The High Commissioner was informed by telex message from FMG that Gowon was en-route to London and that the High Commissioner should make arrangements to receive him with the dignity accorded to former Heads of State. The High Commission's official car was driven to the tarmac and Gowon was led to the car in order to save him the embarrassment of answering questions from the press in the V.I.P. lounge.

In this writer's interview with the High Commissioner, it was clear that Gowon thought it unnecessary to hide his face from the press just because he had been overthrown. He refused to enter the car and insisted on having a brief stop at the V.I.P. lounge. His wishes were granted and he stayed for a short while in the lounge, refusing to answer any questions before he proceeded to meet his wife at the Portman Hotel. From Ambassador Kolo's account, Gowon was calm, collected and cheerful.

Before General Gowon left Lome, his friend, President Eyadema, gave him the equivalent of £10,000 in CFA francs. Together with the *per diem* he had been given by members of his delegation, Gowon came to London to begin a new life. Those on Mrs Gowon's entourage were sent back to Nigeria and the Gowons began their private life. However, the FMG had earlier instructed the High Commissioner to provide General Gowon with accommodation at government expense. Alhaji Kolo was specifically requested to make available to Gowon and his family the High Commission's house at No. 6 Park Square West, the official residence of the Deputy High Commissioner. At the material time it was vacant and was being used as a guest house.

In all fairness, the government had been quite courteous to General Gowon. Gowon, on the other hand, had also been very decent and honest with the government. He was in constant contact with the government and gave the new leaders his word of honour that he would not do anything that would create problems for them. When he left Kampala for Lome, Togo, the government was informed. Again when he decided to leave Lome for London, he had telephone conversations with the Head of State informing the latter of his plans. It was during this conversation that the Head of State agreed to pay his gratuities and pensions to him in London. All Gowon was trying to do, as he later stated, was to avoid a situation in which anyone could 'put a wedge between the government of my country and myself or to encourage some disaffection between us with a view to causing trouble in the country.'<sup>14</sup>

In London, Gowon, had two basic problems; i) accommodation to enable him settle down, and ii) what to do with his time. General Gowon inspected the house at No. 6 Park Square West and found it

In Lome, Gowon got a very warm and elaborate reception suitable for a Head of State. He was given all honours as a former Head of State and was later driven to the presidential palace. The Togolese government wanted to build a special mansion for Gowon so he could settle down in Lome. But he decided that he would rather go first to the United Kingdom to see his wife and be re-united with his family. He wanted to be able to discuss his future plans with his family before making a definite decision. In addition, he wanted to be fully occupied in order to avoid temptations of 'the idle mind' serving as the 'devil's workshop'. General Gowon wanted to be fully occupied, and he surveyed the possibilities of reading political science because he wanted to see what he had done wrong when he was Head of State, as well as identify areas in which he could have done better. Moreover, having served as a General for so many years, Gowon wanted to have an academic degree after his name. This was an opportunity he could not let slip by.

After a short spell at Lome, General Gowon flew to London and stayed with his-family for a few days. After consulting his family he made up his mind to go for university education. He then returned to Lome to bid Eyadema good-bye. President Eyadema was still insistent on building a house for Gowon in Lome - at least, a place Gowon could return to for holidays or stay until such a time that the Government of Nigeria gave him permission to return home. However, after the events of 1976, it became inadvisable for Eyadema to build such a house since Nigeria regarded her as a 'suspect country.'

As discussed earlier, Mrs Gowon had arrived London on 25 July, 1975. Mrs Victoria Gowon was most anxious to go to London during the sales period so that she could buy a number of items which would be on sale. The sales period is the best time usually for the average shopper to visit London and buy cheaply some fairly good quality wares or household goods. Gowon had wanted his wife to wait in Nigeria until his return from Kampala meeting. But since Mrs Gowon was insistent on going to London, her husband reluctantly yielded to the request. With the benefit of hindsight General Gowon thanked providence that he had allowed her to travel to London when she did, because subsequent newspaper publications in Nigeria indicated that she should have reaped the same sour fate that had befallen Mrs Diori of Niger, if she had been at home.

Mrs Gowon was staying in a suite at the Savoy Hotel in London. After the news of the coup, she then moved to a smaller room in a less prestigious hotel—the Portman Hotel. With her were her lady-in-waiting, Mrs Pam, Captain Barau Ibrahim and Mr Yaroson (the police ADC). They were still in London when Nigeria's High Commissioner in London, Alhaji Sule Kolo, got a message that he should tell Mrs Gowon to make arrangements to clear the personal effects of

her family from the official residence of General Gowon.<sup>13</sup> The High Commissioner was informed by telex message from FMG that Gowon was en-route to London and that the High Commissioner should make arrangements to receive him with the dignity accorded to former Heads of State. The High Commission's official car was driven to the tarmac and Gowon was led to the car in order to save him the embarrassment of answering questions from the press in the V.I.P. lounge.

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understandably filthy for no one was living there. Moreover, he found the steps too steep for his small children; he feared they could fall and break their bones. Also, he did not want to remain as a guest of the Nigerian Government. He therefore turned down the offer. In a way Gowon was right in the light of what happened later in 1976.

Meanwhile Brigadier Ogbemudia was in London (and had been in London before the coup). One evening Brigadier Ogbemudia and Emmanuel Otti visited General Gowon. Mr Emmanuel Otti had been Gowon's friend since 1962 when the latter was in Camberley Staff College. During the Civil War Mr Otti was forced to return to the Eastern Region while his wife Mrs Dupe Otti<sup>15</sup> (a Yoruba lady) remained behind in Lagos.

While her husband was away, some officials wanted Mrs Otti to move out of their official house in Lagos, but General Gowon had refused and insisted that she should stay in the quarters. She was there until her husband returned to join the family after the Civil War. They all later moved to London.

At this particular point in time when Gowon was looking for accommodation, the Ottis were decorating their property at 472 Finchley Road, London, N.W. 11, with the intention of moving in. They offered the house to General Gowon, gave him the keys and asked him to stay there as long as he wished. Brigadier Ogbemudia then helped the Ottis to finish the redecoration to enable the General's family to move in. For General Gowon, Ogbemudia is a very faithful and dedicated aide and friend. In September 1975, they were able to move to the Finchley Road house.

The second problem was soon disposed of. General Gowon did not consider it logical to apply to Cambridge University because he had been awarded an honorary LLD degree there in 1973. He applied to Oxford University which replied that admissions were too late for 1975 since their new students had matriculated. The University, however, suggested that Gowon could start off the next session in their Master's programme. But Gowon was not really ready to spend a year idling. It was at this point that Professor Ishaya Audu asked Gowon if he would mind going to Warwick University. Gowon did not mind, so Professor Ishaya Audu made the arrangements and Gowon was offered admission. Gowon had gone to inspect the campus and was delighted by what he saw. More attractive was the fact that the campus is only a two hour drive from London. Since he had acquired his Cambridge School Certificate from Government College, Zaria, and had got J.S.S.C. and P.S.C. he was qualified for admission. On October 6, Gowon registered as a student. It was suggested that he should register for a Master's programme, but he declined. Gowon wanted to go through all the experiences of undergraduate life.

In this period, Gowon depended on charity from friends until his money started coming in from September 1975. In his letter to General Gowon on 23 August, 1975, then Brigadier O. Obasanjo as Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters (SHQ) informed him that the Head of State had approved the requests he made in their telephone conversation while still in Togo. The requests as approved by the Head of State included, i) one Corporal Barau who was to discharge from the service and act as Gowon's valet while he stayed in London – the High Commission was to pay his salary, ii) the High Commission was also to pay the rent of his residence at 472 Finchley Road, iii) he could engage a nanny whose salary was also to be paid by the High Commission, and iv) arrangements to remit his retirement benefits to him in the UK were also to be made. This letter also informed the General that his personal belongings had been sent to his parents-in-law.

On 28th October, 1975, the Acting High Commissioner in London, Mr J.G.O. Olaitan wrote to inform General Gowon that his gratuity of ₦38,304, less his housing loan of ₦3,525.00, had been paid into his account with Barclays Bank, Apapa, Lagos. Of this amount about ₦20,000 naira had been remitted to Gowon in London before February 1976. In addition, Gowon got his pension of £700 (sterling) monthly until it was stopped after February 1976 events.

General Gowon had built quite a reservoir of goodwill. His refusal to take bribes or kick-backs for contracts awarded meant that the beneficiaries of these contracts were always grateful to him and held him in high esteem. Such was the case of an expatriate who Gowon never knew while in office. This man was so impressed with Gowon's behaviour in office that he gave Gowon £5,000 and each Christmas since then, this expatriate had sent amounts of money of between one to two thousand pounds to Gowon's family.<sup>16</sup>

As long as his retirement benefits kept coming in, Gowon had really no cause to worry about his finances. But this was not to last long. He had resettled in England as a student. Their children had begun to attend schools, and a new chapter of life had opened for the Gowons. Surprisingly, everyone adjusted very quickly to the new life. It was very interesting to many observers that Gowon, a former Head of State, should go back to school. He was supposed, as most Nigerians believe their leaders would, to have stacked away much money. Why did he not live like a king as is often the style of deposed leaders?

Yakubu Gowon had always wanted to go to school and the new situation afforded him the opportunity to read political science. Initially many Nigerians and even Britons found it strange that a former Head of State of the largest black nation would retire to the classroom as a student. Not only did Gowon attend classes like every

other student, he ate with the others and carried his own tray in the student cafeteria. This was ridiculed back home in Nigeria by newspapers and the new government in Nigeria was worried about impressions that would be created of a Nigerian ex-Head of State carrying trays in a student cafeteria.<sup>17</sup>

In his sunny but humble way, Gowon saw initial student reactions of resentment to him as normal. One of the basic gifts Yakubu Gowon is endowed with is the ability to mix with people very easily. He understands youth and knows how to interact with young people. In a short time Yakubu Gowon became acceptable to the students. At long last, Gowon was studying political science, an understanding he wished he had acquired before assuming office as Nigeria's leader. The students at Warwick and other Universities in England, such as Keele, benefitted from his experience at seminars, and Gowon also learnt from their reactions.

Settling down in England could be tough, but England was no new place to Gowon. Having married Victoria Gowon in April 1969, Gowon was blessed with a son, Ibrahim late the same year. His wife lost the second child, a daughter, but was lucky to have another daughter named after Yakubu's mother, Saratu. This was the size of the Gowon family when Victoria Gowon and her two children travelled to London on 25 July, 1975. The family has since been increased by a new member - a daughter - who arrived in March 1979, named Rahila.

Mrs Victoria Gowon, an astute lady with immense intuitive capabilities,<sup>18</sup> adjusted to the new life and subsequently registered as a student of catering at a London University College.

As the Gowons settled to a new life, there were obviously some problems, but nothing so major as to give the family a very rude shock in England. They had thought that life in England would keep them well away from the politics of Nigeria. But they were wrong. Soon they were to experience a very rude shock which would again lead to further adjustment of their lifestyle. Again Gowon was to experience another set of crises - no wonder he referred to himself as 'creature of crises', or 'victim of circumstances'. What was the source of this new set of crises and how did Gowon handle them?

## Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare's 'As You Like It'
- 2 *The Times*, (London) July 30, 1975, p. 1
- 3 *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 30, 1975, p. 10
- 4 *The Times*, (London) August 1, 1975, p. 6

- 5 *Ibid.*  
 6 *Sunday Times*, August 10, 1975, pp. 1 and 2  
 7 *Ibid.*  
 8 *The Times*, August 1, 1975, p. 6  
 9 *Ibid.*  
 10 *West Africa*, 4 August 1975, p. 887  
 On allegations by the Mohammed regime that Gowon was inaccessible and insensitive, this magazine observed.

But it was generally believed that General Gowon still retained a remarkable modesty and ability to listen to others. Brigadier Mohammed's picture of his predecessor must be accepted as a true one; it is sadly different from the one which had for so long been accepted. (p. 88)

- 11 *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 30, 1975, p. 10  
 12 *Daily Times*, August 2, 1975  
 13 These were later sent to General Gowon's father-in-law's house in Kaduna.  
 14 Letter of 31st March, 1976 to General Obasanjo, YA/WU/N/1  
 15 Mrs Otti was specially invited to Gowon's wedding in 1969.  
 16 This is a British businessman who did not succeed in seeing Gowon during the latter's rule, despite all efforts to do so. He only met Mr Daniel Gowon. Ironically, he was one of those to contribute to General Gowon's settlement in London.  
 17 The new Head of State, Brigadier Mohammed, on hearing about this, sent a message to General Gowon through General Danjuma about the reservations of his government over Gowon's presence in a student cafeteria. He even suggested that Gowon could do the degree course from home. Gowon received the message and only retorted that he thought the newspaper accounts in Nigeria had exaggerated the issue and that he could handle the situation effectively and was comfortable with it.  
 18 This intuitive capability had got her into conflict with certain aides of Gowon at Dodan Barracks. She had a quick hunch for detecting the 'bad guy' and as an extrovert, reaching the person concerned. This displeased some officers, especially General Garba. For some officers she was arrogant, for others she was amiable. Generally, she is a straightforward and frank lady.

## Chapter 15

# The Dimka Affair

The new peace Gowon had found with himself and members of his family was not to last very long. After nine hectic years—years spent in attempting to solve Nigeria's myriads of, at times, insoluble problems, Gowon had found that he could relax and think about his family and himself for a change. He was able to receive personal visitors, and visited friends in London. Of course, Nigerians formed the largest number of his visitors. Gowon kept an open door policy of receiving any Nigerian who dropped by his house, but he was soon to regret that decision.

His usual weekly schedule was to spend the week-days at Warwick where he was studying, and then spend some week-ends with his family in London. During holidays or breaks, he returned to his family. It was on one of his week-days at Warwick that Gowon received the news, on February 13, 1976, that a coup attempt had taken place in Nigeria. In this abortive coup, Gowon's successor, General Murtala Mohammed had been killed. Gowon did not hear the broadcast over the BBC which had carried the news. A colleague of his at Warwick later broke the news to him. Investigations indicated that Gowon was genuinely shocked when he received the news. He had always thought that after nine years in office, Nigeria had overcome the usual military coups which punctuated political developments of states where the military had once intervened. Then came the July 1975 coup and later the February 13 bid to wrest power through violence.

The Dimka-led attempted coup had commenced at about 8:30 a.m. on the morning of February 13, 1976. This writer heard the broadcast over Radio Nigeria by Lt-Col Dimka which imposed a curfew throughout the country from 6: a.m. to 6: p.m.<sup>1</sup> A few hours later, a colleague of this writer came to his office at Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru Campus. In the conversation which ensued, this colleague suggested that General Gowon must have been involved in the events of that morning, which had not even become clear. Information about the coup was scarce. His reason was that Gowon had, in an interview in London, said that he was studying political

science in order to return to Nigeria to play new roles in the polity.

Thus after the coup plotters had been routed and the Federal Government statement was published, one was not really surprised about the coincidence of views on the Gowon role in the coup.

However, the coup bid petered out by mid-day and the nation was to learn later that General Mohammed was killed in his car which had been caught in the early morning Lagos traffic jam. Under normal circumstances, with adequate security and traffic privileges accorded to the Head of State, it would not have been possible for Dimka and his colleagues to get at the Head of State the way they did. The price of the 'low profile' paid by Mohammed was very expensive<sup>2</sup> and his surviving colleagues knew that the initial concept of keeping a 'low profile' had to change.<sup>3</sup>

At about 6:25 p.m. on the same day, the Federal Military Government issued a statement to the effect that attempts by some dissident groups in the army to topple General Mohammed's government had been foiled.<sup>4</sup> A dawn to dusk curfew was imposed and all borders and airports were closed. On the 14th of February, an apparently sad Lt-General Olusegun Obasanjo, who had just been appointed as Head of State by the SMC, made a broadcast to the nation. He confirmed that General Mohammed had been killed and that four other officers, including Col Ibrahim Taiwo, the military Governor of Kwara State, were also killed. He informed the nation that a military Board of Inquiry had been set up by the Supreme Military Council to carry out full investigations into the events of February 13th.

Meanwhile, Mr Oketunji, the Commissioner of Police, Lagos, had declared Lt-Col Dimka, Captain Dauda Usman and Sergeant Clement Yildar wanted persons. For Gowon, the most important issue in the events of February 13th, apart from its bloody and tragic nature, was the statement issued by the Federal Military Government on 18th February 1976.

The Federal Government statement narrated the events which took place on that fateful day and even tried to proffer reasons for the coup attempt from documents it claimed to have acquired. These reasons were:

- i) that the Federal Government was going communist and the coup was to return to a non-aligned position;
- ii) that the coup makers were opposed to the promotion of Brigadiers to Generals, especially the promotion of Brigadier Danjuma to Lt-General and his appointment as Army Chief of Staff;
- iii) that it was aimed at restoring Gowon to leadership since the actors believed that Gowon had not been given a chance to change; and
- iv) that all former governors were to be returned to their posts,

while all officials retired or dismissed were to be reinstated and subsequently dealt with 'legally'.

The statement went further to contend that the abortive coup 'was reactionary in conception and bloody by design.' It had neither religious nor ethnic motivation.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the statement was analytic and, at some points, conjectural, as the extract below indicates:

Lt-Col Dimka is a relation of Mr S.K. Dimka, the Kwara State Commissioner of Police, who is married to General Gowon's older sister. Police Commissioner Dimka is currently under interrogation along with other accomplices of Lt-Col Dimka. For all practical purposes, the intent of Lt-Col Dimka was to restore General Gowon and his associates to power. As a matter of fact, the Federal Government has ample evidence to show that General Yakubu Gowon knew, and by implication approved, the coup plot.

It is known that Lt-Col Dimka had been in touch with General Gowon both directly and through some other participants in the abortive coup plot. One of the participants had confessed under interrogation that he personally went to the United Kingdom several times to brief General Gowon about the plan. He went to the United Kingdom on the pretext that he was going on private medical treatment and the army records have confirmed that he was permitted to visit the United Kingdom for medical treatment on those very occasions confessed by this officer.

The Federal Government wishes to take this opportunity to reassure the nation that everything is under control. . . . As soon as investigations are completed, the Federal Government will take prompt action to deal with all those involved in that plot.<sup>6</sup>

Reading through the whole statement, one wonders at the necessity of such a detailed statement which engaged in conjecture when a board was yet to investigate the coup attempt and try all the suspects. Was Gowon singled out because Dimka had gone to the British High Commission to request that a message be passed to him to leave London for Togo? Was that evidence that Gowon knew about the coup? What was the reason for delineating Dimka's remote relation to Gowon? If the FMG had enough data to show that Gowon knew about and helped plan the coup, was it not more appropriate to send this data to the Military Board of Inquiry? Was it fair for a government which had set up a board of inquiry to find people guilty before they appeared before such a board? Or was the government under such pressure to pacify some people or sections of the community that it found it necessary to deny that the abortive coup had no religious or ethnic base? With investigations still going on, how could

the FMG have known that? Was the government really under so much pressure that it became expedient to find a scape-goat?

These are questions which come to one's mind after reading the government statement which came out barely five days after the attempted coup. Some of these questions have since been answered. Others, perhaps we may never find answers for. But as researchers dig into the archives, many more answers are likely to be found. With most of the suspected actors in the coup gone, and the reticence of some living actors who were in the government, there are likely to be more questions than answers, for many years to come. Let us, however, follow the sequences as far as our key figure in this book is concerned, to see how far he was involved in the 'Dimka affair'.

On hearing the Federal Government's statement, Gowon denied it. In a BBC programme, Gowon said that on his honour as a Christian and as an officer, he had no prior knowledge of the coup. He pointed out that he still adhered to his word of honour to his successors that he would create no problems for them or for the country. Gowon denied that Dimka ever discussed the coup plans with him.<sup>7</sup>

The reaction to the Federal Government statement in Nigeria was quick and spontaneous. As an illustration, we shall follow the reactions of a newspaper which was largely taken over in 1975 by the Federal Government which had bought the majority shares in the company. This is the *Daily Times* newspaper. In a number of ways, the *Daily Times* since late 1975 started to reflect Federal Government views, and even had its Managing Director appointed by the Federal Government.

In an issue of that paper published on February 20, 1976 the paper reported that there were sporadic reactions in the country 'immediately it was known that General Gowon was involved in the abortive coup of last Friday.'<sup>8</sup> It claimed that various groups had paraded the Lagos streets, after the Federal Government statement, demanding that:

- i) the Federal Government should do all it could to bring Gowon back to the country;
- ii) Gowon should be dismissed at once from the Nigerian Army and that his entitlements should be stopped;
- iii) all those military governors, police and military officers who had been close to the Gowon regime and who had been retired should be detained immediately;
- iv) all those involved in the abortive coup should be paraded in the cities for people to see them before they were publicly executed.<sup>9</sup>

The paper then went on to quote the Federal Government statement which implicated Gowon. Although the paper was supposedly

reporting events, there is enough evidence, as we shall see later, to show that it was raising public expectations and feeling the pulse of the public on issues the Federal Government was about to take major decisions on.

In its own editorial entitled 'A Plotter For All Seasons', the newspaper stated: 'This nation must be shocked by the news of General Yakubu Gowon's complicity in last Friday's abortive coup in which the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Murtala Mohammed was assassinated.'<sup>10</sup>

The editorial went on to express further shock occasioned by the inordinate ambition of a man who after nine years of rule and 'a dismal record of officially encouraged corruption, graft, nepotism and ineptitude' wanted to return to power. It wondered how after all the concessions made to General Gowon, he could still plot against the government. The editorial added that it was unknown to most Nigerians that as of then, Gowon's 'cooks, stewards, gardeners, etc.' were maintained through the 'sweat of the Nigerian people'. It added that:

General Gowon has betrayed Nigeria. The law of the land stipulates death penalty for treason. General Gowon should face charges of treason. The first mistake in which those who served under a corrupt regime were probed to the exclusion of their master should not be repeated. If the smaller men who took part in Dimka's Gowon-inspired coup are to pay the supreme sacrifice for their felony, it is only logical that the man at the helm of it all should not be spared. The Federal Government should, therefore, set up an appropriate machinery to obtain the extradition of General Gowon from Britain . . . Now that the cat has been let out of the bag, the *Daily Times* calls on all Nigerians to go about their normal business in the hope that the Federal Government will take prompt action to deal with all those involved in the plot.<sup>11</sup>

Many other Nigerian newspapers reacted in similar fashion, notably the *New Nigerian*, *The Nigerian Standard* and the *Nigerian Herald*.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Federal Government's statement had condemned General Gowon before he was even given a chance to a fair hearing. Moreover, some of the allegations were unfair. From the last chapter, it was clear that the concessions given to Gowon did not include 'cooks, stewards, gardeners, etc.'. The only reason that can be adduced for this was an attempt to excite public reaction against Gowon - a way of saying - 'after all the concessions to him, how could he behave like this?' Statements about Gowon having betrayed the nation were affirmative, while Gowon's denials of the charges were couched in sarcastic phrases such as 'Another denial by Jack'.

Yet even more interesting was the reaction of the Federal Government to Gowon. The sequence of events only confirmed the impression that either the *Daily Times* was acting as a megaphone of the Federal Government or was actually very influential among members of the federal decision-making units in Lagos.

On the 2nd of March, 1976, the new Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Brigadier S.M. Yar'Adua wrote to General Gowon. His letter requested General Gowon (as a General on the 'Reserved List') to appear before the board in Lagos to testify and react to questions in connection with the abortive coup, in order to clear himself of allegations made against him.<sup>13</sup>

Before General Gowon could send a reply to the request from Lagos, he received another letter. This time, the letter came from the Nigerian High Commission in London. Dated 10th March, 1976, the letter signed by the Acting High Commissioner, Mr J.G.O. Olaitan, informed Gowon that the FMG had instructed that he should be informed of the decision of the SMC 'that all privileges and benefits currently enjoyed by you under the terms of the letter No. AS.605/221 of 6th March 1976'<sup>14</sup> addressed to you by the Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters should be suspended until further notice.' The letter went on to list these 'privileges and facilities' as: i) payment of the salary of a valet or batman; ii) payment of the rent of the house, (472 Finchley Road where Gowon was then residing); iii) payment of the salary of a nanny; and iv) payment of retirement benefits in the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> These were the privileges and can be compared with the assertions of the *Daily Times*. Gowon had not yet even replied to the request of the FMG which he received on March 6, 1976. Yet along the lines suggested by the *Daily Times*, Gowon's privileges had been suspended.

On the 12th of March 1976, Gowon wrote to Brigadier S.M. Yar'Adua.<sup>16</sup> In his letter Gowon expressed gratitude for the opportunity given to him to clear himself of the serious allegations made against him. As a former Head of State who believed in the peace and stability of the country and the loyalty of its citizens to the government, he would be delighted to cooperate fully with the Board of Inquiry, so as to defend his good name and personal honour. He was convinced that the SMC would give him a chance to clear himself, but unfortunately the Federal Government statement and the consequently hostile public reactions to him had made him to fear for his safety in Nigeria. To appear before any board in Lagos or anywhere in Nigeria would not provide an adequate sense of security for him, Gowon asserted.

He reiterated his decision to cooperate with the board and sincerely hoped that arrangements would be made for him to appear before the board in the UK or in any other neutral country mutually

agreed upon. As an alternative he could swear an affidavit before any magistrate or representative of the government's choice. In the latter case, he would need a set of questions to which he would then react. Again he promised his fullest cooperation with the board and a more detailed letter on the subject later on.

On 22nd March, 1976, Brigadier Musa Yar'Adua wrote another letter to General Gowon, in reply to the latter's letter of 12 March, 1976. In this letter, the Chief of Staff noted that since the matter was Nigeria's internal affair, it would be improper for the board to hold sessions outside the country. He therefore regretted that he could not meet Gowon's request for a hearing outside Nigeria. On Gowon's concern for security, he took it upon himself to guarantee government protection for General Gowon and reiterated the government's belief in justice and fairplay.

Brigadier Yar'Adua went further to demonstrate to Gowon the good faith of the FMG by pointing out that Moses Gowon of the Nigerian Air Force (who had earlier on been detained) had been released and that he had returned to his normal duties after clearance by the board. He hoped the General would cooperate and reconsider his stand on the issue. But in the event that he still stood by his earlier statement, the Brigadier pointed out that the FMG would have no option but to approach the Queen's government - a step he would esitate to take in respect for Gowon's former position in Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

There is no doubt that the government bungled the whole affair right from the beginning. The Federal Government statement of 18th February 1976 was uncalled for. The contents were anticipatory and pre-emptive. One cannot agree more with Chief Amachree and Solomon Asemota,<sup>18</sup> that the contents of the FMG's statement had numerous implications. In the first place, any reader would get the impression that the FMG had satisfied itself that Gowon was guilty even before he was given an opportunity to be heard. Secondly, it seemed the FMG had made up its mind to dismiss the General from the army with ignominy and stop his entitlements, even before Musa Yar'Adua wrote to him on March 2, 1976. As was shown above, the FMG did not even get Gowon's reply to the request for him to present himself before the investigating panel before his privileges were suspended. Thirdly, one wonders why the FMG's statement was necessary after it had set up a tribunal with very wide powers, except in so far as it wanted to ruin Gowon's reputation or make him a scape-goat. Fourthly, there was not an occasion when the tribunal ever issued a summons or warrant for Gowon to testify, and it could be logically assumed that this was because it did not need Gowon's evidence. Fifthly, it is interesting that the statement ended on a note of reassurance to the public that the Federal Government would handle the matter effectively.

It is also interesting that the *Daily Times* editorial of February 20, after finding Gowon guilty as 'a plotter for all seasons' and recommending capital punishment for him, ended on a note similar to the FMG's statement. It urged Nigerians to go about their business in the hope that the 'Federal Government will take prompt action to deal with all those involved in plot', now 'that the cat has been let out of the bag . . .'. Was there a fear of public uprising? Were these attempts to assuage such fears? And was Gowon an important variable in the Federal Government's calculus of public pacification? Scap-goatism seemed appropriate at this point.

Gowon's fears were genuine. The Federal Government which had invited him home to clear his name had set a stage unfavourable for him to be heard. In fact, the FMG had found him guilty before the tribunal or board had had the opportunity to hear him. Of course, the public reaction which followed the FMG's statement was natural. The same crowds that had cheered Gowon yesterday, were now demanding his head. Many newspapers made suggestions on how to get Gowon home.<sup>19</sup> Many Nigerians were incensed to hear that Gowon was involved. Part of the inchoate political culture in Nigeria is the belief that the government can hardly tell a lie. Newspapers reported that Nigerians were angry and were urging the government to bring Gowon back to face trial.<sup>20</sup>

Given the Federal Government statement and public reaction to it, Gowon naturally felt that it was unsafe for him to appear before the panel in Nigeria. He then offered to appear before the panel in the United Kingdom or in any neutral country mutually agreed upon. As an alternative, he could swear to an affidavit.

The Federal Government rejected the idea of the board holding sessions outside the country. But one is at a loss to see why it rejected Gowon's offer of swearing an affidavit. The only argument was that the allegations were too serious to accept an affidavit as sufficient. In accordance with military law, an individual could give evidence on oath by way of an affidavit.

In any case, most Nigerians were not even told of Gowon's reaction and his suggestions beyond the claim that he had refused to come home and clear his name. Fewer still even knew that Gowon wrote two long letters to the Head of State explaining his side of the story.

Perhaps, one of the interesting things about the whole exercise was the attempt by Brigadier Musa Yar'Adua to lure Gowon back to Nigeria. In paragraph 4 of his letter (22 March, 1976), Brigadier Yar'Adua had intimated to Gowon that his younger brother, Major Moses Gowon, had been cleared by the Board of Inquiry and 'has since been released to return to his normal duties . . .'. Gowon, on receipt of this letter on 27th March, 1976, took the trouble of ascertaining the claims of Brigadier Yar'Adua. He phoned Nigeria

and was informed that Moses Gowon was still in detention. In fact, Major Moses Gowon was not released until 9th July, 1976, three and half months after Yar'adua's letter. He did not continue with his normal duties, but was discharged from the Air Force.

If nothing else, this blatant lie by the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, confirmed to Gowon that the government could not keep its words with him, nor could it offer him adequate protection. He saw it as a lure and was probably puzzled by the motives behind such an attempt. He therefore declined to return to the country and opted for direct communication with the Head of State.

Thus on the 31st March 1976, Gowon wrote a nine page letter to the new Head of State, Lt-General Olusegun Obasanjo.<sup>21</sup> In this letter General Gowon expressed his sadness over the events of February 13th, 1976 and appealed to Obasanjo that everyone should allow sentiments to be put to one side, 'allow reason to prevail and let us together get to the bottom of this sad event and find a solution to the endemic problem of coups and counter-coups in Nigeria . . . .'

Gowon denied knowledge of, or involvement in the abortive coup and expressed his agitation over the Federal Government's statement. As he expressed it, 'I have been virtually condemned by my government without giving me, first, a chance to defend myself, my good name and honour and that of my family and, second, the opportunity to defend the important image, honour and dignity of the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, which it pleased God with the support of the people of Nigeria and the Armed Forces for me to hold for nine years and which is today your unenviable honour to hold.'

He then drew the attention of the Head of State to his pledge at his press conference in Kampala in July 1975, and the cordial relations which had existed between himself and his successors, as a result of which the latter extended to him all courtesies befitting a former Head of State. Gowon then traced his journey from Kampala through Lome to London, his registration at Warwick University, and how he later got to hear about the coup.

He felt that he was being implicated in the whole plot because of his open door policy which had made it possible for a number of Nigerians to visit him. Gowon then turned specifically to the list of those who actually visited him and restated the purposes of the visits and contents of discussions during such visits. Between July 1975 to February 1976, his visitors included:<sup>22</sup>

- i) Major-General Hassan Katsina - who delivered a goodwill message from the late Head of State, General Mohammed;
- ii) Brigadier (later Lt-General) Yakubu Danjuma and Col A.S. Wali - a visit that was cleared by General Mohammed;

- iii) Late Major-General Bissalla and Major-General Adefope (in the company of Col A.S. Wali and another government officer from the Ministry of Defence). This visit was cleared by General Mohammed and nothing about coups was discussed;
- iv) Major-General Bissalla and Adefope called again on their way back to Nigeria. Gowon stressed that he had no private discussion with Bissalla or the generals;
- v) Alhaji Sule Kolo and Alhaji Ahmadu Suka also visited Gowon to pay their courtesies;<sup>23</sup>
- vi) Admiral Wey, while in London for a medical check-up called twice to see the Gowons and
- vii) Lt-Col Dimka, Mr A. Kama of the High Commission in London, and Mr Jonathan Ibrahim of Nigerian Airways, who called together between 9-10 p.m. on 21st December 1975. Gowon observed that Dimka on that occasion had claimed to have come to London from a sports conference in the USA and had only dropped by to pay his compliments. On that occasion, Gowon claimed, Dimka did most of the talking. He was a bit drunk and talked about numerous issues including Angola and the government of Nigeria. Gowon emphasized that he spoke only once in a while to correct him. All discussions were carried out in English and he had no private session with Dimka, nor did he discuss the coup.

The letter continued in paragraph 19 which we shall quote fully:

Our conversation did not at any time touch on a future coup. I am experienced enough militarily and in the art of government not to engage in serious discussion of planning a coup with a mixed group such as called to see me on the night of 21st December 1975 in the persons of Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka, an army officer whose background and capabilities I could not vouchsafe; Mr Jonathan Ibrahim, a junior Nigerian Airways pilot on a course in the UK, and Mr Kama, a junior staff member of the Nigerian High Commission whose only role was to give the others a lift to and from my home. Certainly this is not a group anyone would plan a coup with. It is pertinent to point out that at no time did I see Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka alone or privately with any other person. The only time any word such as a coup was inferred was in response to a question to Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka as to where he was during the 29th July 1975 change of government. He told us that he was in the hospital here in the UK. My comment then was that all I knew about the coup of 1975 was that there was a strong rumour that there was going to be a coup and the only name mentioned in connection with plot was that of Col J. Garba with

whom I discussed the report and he denied knowledge of it. I left; it happened; I accepted it and called on others to do the same and to me it is now all over. It is now part of history. I said I have accepted what has happened and given the government my loyalty and support and have called on all others to do the same for the sake of peace and stability in our fatherland. I certainly did not discuss or encourage any future coup plan with Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka then or at any other time thereafter. It was the last time I ever saw him or heard from him. It would be of interest to know the date, time and place Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka said he saw and met me in January 1976 and what he said we discussed.

Apparently, at this point in time, the General was not fully aware of the details of allegations against him. He therefore pleaded in paragraph 22 for the government to furnish him with details of the allegations.

In paragraph 23, Gowon concluded:

I have tried to be as brief but as accurate as possible. I have told you what I know and would co-operate and answer any points that you may wish clarified. You know that I value truth, honesty, sincerity and total integrity. I value forthrightness. In that context since I swore and publicly declared my loyalty to you all, apart from the respect which I always had for you all who helped me and made it possible for me to give a leadership to the country for nine years, I could not turn around and harm or hurt you. I honestly would not be in your way after I had accepted the outcome of the bloodless change of 29th July 1975. Besides I am not a bloodthirsty man. I have always held that we have shed enough blood in the country as a sacrifice for the unity of our nation. I honestly do not see the point of any one encouraging the elimination of an old colleague who did not touch a hair from one's head and with whom I had been in correspondence since 30th July 1975; on 1st August 1975 on my way to Lome, and later in August through retired Brigadier Abba Kyari. I believe that Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka is only trying to implicate innocent people while the real culprits get away with it. These people are trying to cover up their trail by diverting attention from themselves by getting him to make such wild, fanciful but false accusations against me and others.

Gowon then explained that he did not know much about Lt-Col Dimka, and that only after the coup did he inquire about their relationship and he was informed that Dimka was a distant cousin of his brother-in-law. He expatiated on this point:

... I have already said that I do not know him well enough to trust him with such serious matters. Besides I am not going to be

involved or be associated with such base and treacherous actions after holding the leadership of the country for nine years. At this stage what else do I want except an honourable and happy retirement – which is now being seriously threatened.

... I hope I have been clear enough. I have spoken the truth because this is the way I have been brought up and this is the way I tried to bring all of you up when we worked as a team in the interest of our country. . . .<sup>24</sup>

Gowon ended his letter by wishing General Obasanjo and his colleagues success in their onerous task of leading 'our difficult but promising nation'.

Given the list of names offered by Gowon one only hoped that the panel ascertained the truth from these people – Major-General Hassan Katsina (rtd.), Vice-Admiral A. Wey (rtd.), Col Wali, Mr Jonathan Ibrahim, Mr Kamah, Alhaji Sule Kolo, Alhaji A. Suka, General Adefope (rtd.), Lt-General Yakubu Danjuma. As respectable and responsible citizens, their evidence would have been very useful. Research confirms that Alhaji Sule Kolo and Mr Kama were interrogated.

In addition, the government could have cross-checked on the number of times that the late General Bissalla visited London, and how many times Lt-Col Dimka travelled out of the country and the countries he visited. The Federal Government statement had claimed that 'one of the participants had confessed under interrogation that he personally went to the United Kingdom several times to brief General Gowon about the plan.' Although General Gowon had in his letters requested the name of this individual, it has never been made public at the time of writing in 1983. Thus this 'ghost' participant still lacks identity.

After the publication of the Dimka confessions, Gowon again reacted. But let us summarize the Dimka 'confessions' as they affected Gowon. Essentially, Dimka's 'confessions' indicated that:

- i) Lt-Col Dimka visited General Gowon in the company of two other people in December 1975. This visit was not cleared by the FMG;
- ii) that according to Dimka, General Gowon had asked him to contact General Bissalla for his instructions;
- iii) that Gowon had told Dimka 'you boys make sure you take time and no mistakes';
- iv) that Dimka, on the morning of the coup, had gone to the British High Commission in Lagos, and had requested that General Gowon should be contacted to move to Togo from London. Thus the coup was to restore General Gowon to office — according

to the Federal Government statement of February 18, 1976 that Lt-Col Dimka was a relation of Mr S.K. Dimka, the Commissioner of Police in Kwara State, married to General Gowon's sister.

Although there was no reply to his letter of March 31st, 1976, Gowon felt that he had a duty to write another letter. Thus when Dimka's 'confessions' were published in the dailies, he felt compelled to write a rebuttal on May 7th, 1976. In this letter he reacted to every point made in Dimka's confessions. For purposes of fairness to him, this letter is included as Appendix C.

Reacting to the first point above, that Lt-Col Dimka visited him, General Gowon clearly denied any foreknowledge of that visit. He went further:

As a Nigerian, my house was open to all Nigerians and all are welcomed as such irrespective of their tribe, religion or status. I had believed that my government (i.e. Nigerian Government) believed and trusted me as I believed and trusted in their good faith. They had made it possible for me to be able to receive and to meet Nigerians from all walks of life. From the public service as well as the private sector. I honestly never suspected that any one of those who called to see us had any ulterior motive for the visit, it in the case of Lt-Col Dimka it seemed as though I was mistaken.<sup>25</sup>

He made it clear that he did not plan for such a meeting and that contrary to Dimka's claims that he came to London from Spain, he had told the Gowons that he was arriving from the USA.

In very strong terms, Gowon also denied ever telling Dimka to meet Major-General Bissalla for any special instructions. According to Gowon:

I certainly did not ask Lt-Col Dimka to see the late Major-General Bissalla for any special briefing as he claimed, not did I ever have any secret discussions with the late Major-General Bissalla when he and Major-General Adefope and others called to see us in late November/December, 1975. It is not true that there was ever a time myself, Alhaji Sule Kolo, Mr Kama and Lt-Col Dimka had any discussion together in December 1975 or January 1976 as claimed by Lt-Col Dimka.

The third issue that General Gowon had told Dimka, 'you boys make sure you take time and no mistakes', Gowon found strange. He denied ever saying anything of the sort to Dimka. As he put it;

One of the last points made by Lt-Col Dimka about me was when he said as he was leaving I told him 'you boys make sure you take time and no mistakes' and later on said, 'When I was leaving he said we should take care – no mistakes'. I said nothing of the sort. It is pertinent to point out here that when he came to the house, he seemed to have already had some few drinks and was quite incoherent and verbose at times. Unlike him, I do not have to make any such excuse for being drunk or to be under the influence of drink.

The fourth and fifth points may be taken together. Gowon found it strange that Dimka's motive for going to the High Commission was being imputed to him, and he certainly did not lay any premium on a distant relation with Dimka whom he barely knew. In this letter to Obasanjo he again reiterated his plea of innocence and he stated this very succinctly:

You have now got my comments on Lt-Col Dimka's statement or story. I have been implicated in something I do not know anything about and in which I had no hand. My misfortune was that Lt-Col Dimka called to see us unexpectedly on the night of 21st December 1975. Again, perhaps, being a tribesman – an Angas, from the Plateau, possibly related to my brother-in-law Mr S.K. Dimka, but by no means my agent – was involved and went to the United Kingdom High Commission in Lagos to try and contact me. For that, I am accused and being hunted as a criminal. Why impute other people's motives to me?

He then proceeded to remind the HFMG of the mysterious man who had been mentioned, in the Federal Government release, as having visited him many times to plan the coup. As Gowon asked; '. . . who is this mysterious man that came to see me several times in London to discuss the February 13th 1976 coup plot?' He ended his letter by telling General Obasanjo of his willingness to answer any questions or react to any allegations made against him by anyone involved in the coup, including the 'mysterious' fellow and that he would do so 'fully and as honestly as he had done so far.'

A number of interesting things came out of these letters of General Gowon. These letters were neither replied to nor ever acknowledged. Nor were Nigerians told that Gowon had ever made attempts to react to these issues. There was no other information offered beyond the 'skewed' fact that Gowon had refused to come and testify before the Board of Inquiry. Then about 15th or 16th May, a week after Gowon's letter to Obasanjo, Gowon heard over the *Voice of America* radio that he had been stripped of his rank, all his honours

and entitlements, and that he had been dismissed with ignominy from the army. This was later carried in Nigeria's dailies.<sup>26</sup> At the time of writing, Gowon has still not received a letter to this effect. All he knew about his dismissal was in the news media. The Obasanjo government did not even reciprocate Gowon's courtesies in writing so many times by at least formally informing him of his dismissal.

In fact, Gowon's dismissal was not gazetted until the military was about to make its exit in 1979. In their anxiety, the government probably forgot that they had not gazetted it. Thus the Federal Government notice No. 63 of 18 January 1979 formally declared Gowon a fugitive offender wanted by the Nigerian Police.<sup>27</sup>

Let us look at the main issues in the Dimka affair. In the first place, as discussed earlier, the Federal Government publication was virtually a pronouncement of a judgement of 'guilty' on Gowon, even before the panel was able to hear him. It would have been a big risk for Gowon to have returned in the context of the convictions held by the FMG and the news media, and subsequent public reactions to him. The FMG gave the impression that it was in dire need of a scapegoat to take on the brunt of people's anger. They got one in Gowon. Circumstantial evidence accruing from Dimka's behaviour and alleged confessions were taken for the truth. From research, this writer believes that the Federal Government, in its political schizophrenia in this period, did not really want Gowon's evidence, nor did they want him to come back after a point in time.

Evidence by Gowon would have had the high risk of clearing a much needed scapegoat - which would have made a dent in the credibility of the FMG. Thus it was clear to the Federal Government right from the beginning that it would be unreasonable for Gowon to return, except in so far as he wanted to sign his own death warrant. Although Gowon had declined to give evidence in Nigeria, he had suggested an affidavit as an alternative.

The Board of Inquiry should have summoned him all the same if they found his evidence essential. This would have given the board a formal answer from Gowon. The FMG wrote to Gowon before the board ever had cause to have called for Gowon's evidence if it wanted it. It did not, and it may be argued that the board did not need the evidence. Secondly, Section 96(1) of the Military Act (1960)<sup>28</sup> provides:

Save as otherwise provided in this ordinance, the rules as to evidence to be observed in proceedings before courts-martial shall be the same as those observed in civil courts in the Federal Territory of Lagos and no person shall be required in proceedings before a court martial to answer any question or to produce any document which he could not be required to answer or produce in

similar proceedings before a civil court in the Federal Territory of Lagos.<sup>2b</sup>

In addition, subsection 2 states clearly that:

Notwithstanding anything in subsection (1), a statutory declaration shall, in a trial by court martial, be admissible as evidence of the facts stated in the declaration in a case where, and to the extent which, oral evidence to the like effect would be admissible in that trial.<sup>30</sup>

The most relevant of the conditions under which a declaration may not be admissible is 2(d) which states;

in any case, if the court martial is of opinion that it is desirable in the interests of justice that oral evidence should be given in lieu of the declaration and declares that it is of the opinion.<sup>31</sup>

Thus our arguments are:

- i) that the Board of Inquiry/Tribunal (or court martial) never for once invited Gowon to testify<sup>32</sup> and thus, by implication did not need Gowon's evidence;
- ii) that the Federal Government or the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Brigadier Yar'adua (not the Chairman of the Board) wrote to Gowon to request his return; thus the court martial never even invited Gowon to testify;
- iii) that even if for purposes of argument one accepts that Yar'adua could invite Gowon to testify, he was not competent to decide how Gowon should give evidence as he did in his letter of 22nd March 1976 to the effect that the Federal Government could not accept Gowon's suggestions in view of the seriousness of the allegations. Yar'adua was not writing on behalf of the court martial or Board of Inquiry. There is no evidence that the Board of Inquiry or the Tribunal<sup>33</sup> considered Gowon's views (if these were ever made available to it) and in accordance with section 96(2d).
- iv) that no such decision of the court martial or Board of Inquiry or Tribunal was ever communicated to Gowon, and
- v) that the closed door or secret nature of the trials did not offer the public a chance to assess whether or not the proceedings of the court martial tallied with the provisions as stated in section 96(1) quoted above.

Given the above points, one wonders whether Gowon was being lured home to face untimely death in order to mollify the emotional

state of some sections of the Nigerian community. Or was it an attempt to use Gowon as a scape-goat as discussed above? If it is the latter, then it was not surprising that there were public statements made about Gowon at home which did not include relevant data such as were available to the military leaders. It may be restated here that the military leaders did not seriously expect Gowon to come back. It was not in their interest that Gowon should come back. As long as Gowon was in London, he was a good enough target for Garba to occasionally peck at during his numerous airport press conferences once it was figured that Obasanjo's credibility was sagging. One is not even sure that the fury of the government directed at the British Government was not mere political showmanship.

A careful look at the supposed 'Full text of the tape-recorded confessional statement made by Lt-Col Dimka before the military tribunal', suggests that it is not really a full text. The first part of the conversation confirms this impression. Let us take a brief look at the first two questions and answers:

*Question: With the result of this Statement you made, you asked us to remind you what time starting from the beginning. When does this coup idea first occurred to you. What time, either last year or this year did you really think about the coup?*

*Answer: Frankly speaking I should say it was around January this year, beginning of this year.*

*Question: What were the circumstances. I am sure you did not just start, do you?*

*Answer: No, I think I have to elaborate on this yet. I think it will be unrealistic really to say that the main cause behind the coup was as a result of the majors approach to me. The truth about it is that when I came back from Madrid as I told you yesterday and after having met Bissalla . . .<sup>34</sup>*

In the first question, the questioner (in my italics) gives the impression that there had been an earlier interrogation. Also Dimka's answer to the second question conveys a similar idea of an earlier interview, the contents of which the public did not have the opportunity of seeing in the supposed 'full text'. After all, Dimka said, 'as I told you yesterday'. What did he actually say the day before? Is this section one of the many mysteries of the February 1976 coup and its aftermath? How full, therefore, was the full statement? Or is one to conclude that what Dimka had said 'yesterday' was not tape-recorded; or was someone, somewhere, suppressing information? The Dimka trial is not our focus here, and future research work may give us greater insight into this fluid period.

However if we use Dimka's 'confessions', let us turn to the basic allegations against Gowon again. The first allegation was that he visited Gowon in company of Mr Kama and Mr Ibrahim. There is no hard evidence that the visit was planned, nor was it specifically to discuss the coup. Dimka himself was not categorical on this issue. Asked whether he arranged to go to see Gowon, Dimka said that it was when Messrs Kama and Ibrahim told him they were going to see Gowon and had mentioned that Generals Danjuma and Bissalla had been there earlier, that he decided to go with them.<sup>35</sup> Nor could Gowon have discussed the coup plot with him then. Dimka even claimed that Gowon did not discuss anything about the coup with him but had asked him to see Bissalla for instructions. From Gowon's letter of 31st March, it was clear that Bissalla never went to Gowon at any other time alone. His companions on such visits were available for questioning. Alhaji Kolo whom Dimka had claimed to have discussed the matter with, was interrogated and subsequently freed. This writer's interview with Alhaji Kolo showed that he never travelled with Dimka on the same plane to London as Dimka had claimed. Finally, that Dimka visited Gowon was not enough proof of involvement of the latter in the events of February 13th, Black Friday.

In addition, the Federal Government, as we pointed out earlier, has never released the name of the man who always went to Britain to discuss the coup plot with Gowon. Gowon's letters were never answered, but the Nigerian public was never told either. The secret nature of the trial makes public knowledge of this person impossible. Who was this man? Or was the Federal Government lying?

The second major allegation was that Gowon had told Dimka that he and his colleagues should take care and make no mistakes. This could be given more than one interpretation. As Amachree and Asemota correctly observed, even assuming that Gowon said those words (and he had virulently denied them) the phrase could also mean that the agitated Dimka and his colleagues should make no mistakes that would hamper their progress in the army. In law (and given the section in evidence quoted earlier in the Military Act 96(1) of 1960) if a statement could be given more than one interpretation, the court is bound to give the one favourable to the accused.<sup>36</sup>

Thirdly, that Lt-Col Dimka went to the British High Commission could well be Dimka's own spontaneous action in the situation he found himself. As Dimka himself put it in his 'confessions':

... I think I have to make a remark here. This rush to the British High Commission was a personal affair. It was not part of what I should have done. I think I did it through a sort of personal anxiety or whatever you want to term it.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear from the above that Dimka's actions were not at the promptings of someone else. He went to the British High Commission partly as a result of his confused state of mind. Is it not strange that Gowon who was supposed to have master-minded the coup was still in London? He could easily have travelled to Togo where he could have remained in waiting as safely as in London. It was not necessary for Dimka to invite him through the British High Commission.

Moreover, if Dimka had been sure of the success of the coup and had kept a cool head, it was clear that as leaders of a new government, he and his colleagues could have got a message to Gowon very speedily, rather than getting himself embroiled in diplomatic entanglements.

In addition, as Gowon's lawyers pointed out, 'a man's confession is . . . only evidence against him and not against his accomplice and it is a misdirection to invite a jury to take into account against one accused an extra-judicial confession made by another.'<sup>38</sup>

On balance, Dimka's confessions and Federal Government statement hardly provided enough evidence to link Gowon to the coup. Unless concrete and durable evidence can be produced, Gowon's indignation at being linked with the coup was understandable. It was popularly rumoured that this confession of Dimka's was 'doctored'. Similarly it was widely held that many of those executed were not really guilty. Many Nigerians believe that some of these men, under normal, open military court martial as was held in Ghana sometime ago, would have been freed. Officially, nearly forty people were executed.<sup>39</sup>

It is believed that many more than that number were killed and these were not announced. This writer's interview with an officer of the Nigeria Prisons Department with first-hand information indicated that a well-known Brigadier in the Nigerian Army who was also under arrest would have been executed by mistake. This period was so fluid that many things could have happened even under the surveillance of some members of the Federal Government. The regime had been so badly shaken up that it took quite some time before the new government was able to establish effective control over its affairs.

Perhaps history will yet disgorge information on these trials. That the trials were held in camera made it more difficult for one to dispel rumours. Rumours actually spread far and wide, that some members of the Supreme Military Council seized opportunity of the 'Black Friday' to execute their opponents or rivals. While these cannot be proved, they cannot be easily ignored. One was not sure of the charges against each person and their defence or evidence before the tribunal. A public hearing would have dealt effectively with such doubts.

Nor can one say that there was no iota of truth in the allegations that some of the members of the SMC had interests in the execution of some colleagues. Under the first tribunal chaired by Major-General Obada, a number of persons had been cleared, or were sentenced to serve prison terms or were discharged. Some of these were re-tried by another panel set up under Brigadier Eremebor to review some of the cases. As an illustration, ex-Governor Gomwalk, it was reliably learnt, was sentenced to prison terms by the Obada panel. He was re-tried and sentenced to death by firing squad by the Eremebor tribunal.

Similarly, Isaiah Gowon, General Gowon's younger brother, who was discharged by the Obada panel, was tried again by the Eremebor tribunal for the same offence and was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment.<sup>40</sup> Why was it necessary to set up a second tribunal to re-try people? In the absence of published details anyone's guess would be as correct as the other. In fact, it was even rumoured that some members of the tribunal were sleeping during the trial at one time or the other. Again, this questions the degree of justice dispensed to the accused and the extent of fairness they were given at the hearing.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, the execution of Dimka, Bissalla and others mitigated the tension in some areas of the country. But it cannot be correctly argued, as some of the military leaders with whom this writer discussed the matter explained, that the political temperature was so high that a public trial would have led to more troubles. On the contrary, it would have got the public to know the truth. Nigeria has witnessed worse tension before. Holding the trial in camera and causing a re-trial of those set free by the first tribunal only added to the mystery surrounding the whole exercise. It also questioned the fairness of the trial.

Gowon could not understand why his colleagues could ever have imagined that he was involved in the whole exercise. How could his younger colleagues, who knew him very well, treat him so shoddily? He was very bitter that Nigerians were taking undue advantage of their visits to him to malign him. Again, Yakubu Gowon turned inwards and for a long time only allowed a few well-trusted Nigerians to see him.<sup>42</sup> His attempts to rebuild mutual confidence between himself and his successors were even rebuffed as they maligned him. Even in his bitterness, Gowon hardly made any scathing remarks about his colleagues. It is very interesting that many of Gowon's former colleagues in government and in the army have since publicly and/or privately expressed doubt that Gowon was involved in the coup attempt. Dr Edwin Ogbu (who was Nigeria's Permanent Representative at the United Nations under General Gowon) remarked:

I cannot reconcile myself with that sentiment. Sentiment I call it, and unless I am given concrete facts all those talks about his involvement in the coup do not receive my sympathy. They are at best political ploys.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Major-General Akinrinade (the first Chief of Defence Staff and the GOC of the First Division in Kaduna who first disassociated himself from the Dimka coup) gave an interview to *The Punch* newspaper in which he made his views on the 1976 coup clear. Under a front page caption '1976 COUP: Military had no Evidence against Gowon', *The Punch* published Akinrinade's views. According to Akinrinade:

Well, he (Gowon) was mentioned a few times by different people but you can't use that to say there was a strong case against him. There wasn't a strong case against him . . . I didn't believe that going to see Gowon really was to talk about the coup, to ask him to come back to power. We all know within the Armed Forces that he was not that kind of man; anyway I don't believe he is. I don't think he was still interested in becoming a head of state.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, Akinrinade's testimony, impressionistic as it was, came in 1981. Yet it illustrates some of the views held by his colleagues.

In the same vein, the author's discussion with General I.B.M. Haruna buttressed General Akinrinade's views. He opined that Gowon was not the type to hit back at his successors and renege on his word of honour.<sup>45</sup> Col Ochefu also expressed very strong doubts if Gowon would ever demean himself to that level. Many serving officers gave their impressions on the issue of Gowon and the 1976 coup, but unfortunately we cannot mention their names. Generally, the impression was that Gowon was too disciplined and decent an officer to be involved in any coup plot for that matter.

Apart from the mudslinging and humiliation that Gowon suffered in Nigeria, he suffered severe hardship in London as well as a result of the Dimka coup, to which this writer strongly believes Gowon was not a party. What were these hardships and how did Gowon cope with them? This is our next focus.

## Notes

1 Below is the text of Lt-Col Dimka's Broadcast, 13 February 1976  
Good morning, fellow Nigerians.

This is Lt-Col B.A. Dimka of the Nigerian Army calling. I bring you good

ridings Murtala Mohammed's hypocrisy has been defeated. His government is now overthrown by the young revolutionaries. All the Nigerian military governors have no powers over the states they now govern. The state of affairs will be run by the military brigade commanders until further notice. All Commissioners are sacked except for the Armed forces and police Commissioners who will be redeployed. All senior officers should remain calm in their respective posts. No division commander will issue orders for his formations until further notice. Any attempt to foil this plan from any quarter will be met with death. You are warned, it is all over the 19 states. All acts of sabotage observed will be death. Everyone should be calm. Please stay at your radios for further announcements. All borders, airports and seaports are closed until further notice. Curfew is imposed as from six a.m. to six p.m. [obviously Dimka meant six p.m. to six a.m.] Thank you. We are all together.

Extracted from O. Oyediran (ed.) *Survey of Nigerian Affairs 1976-1977* (Lagos, N.I.I.A. 1981) p. 279

- 2 General Mohammed never moved to the official Dodan Barracks residence of General Gowon. He remained in his house in Ikoyi and drove to work at Dodan Barracks. It was not unusual for the General to drive in the streets without adequate security. Once, the *Daily Times* carried a picture of the General driving in a Volvo car in the usual heavily jammed Lagos traffic. The coup plotters knew his routine and must have been aware that he hardly used outriders and heavy security when going out of his house.
- 3 Security for Obasanjo, Danjuma, Yar'adua and others was very heavy - almost a mobile fortress, after this incident.
- 4 Bendel Newspapers Corporation, *Dimka's Confession: The Tragedy of a Nation* (Benin: Bendel Newspapers Corporation, n.d.), pp. 6-7
- 5 *Daily Times*, February 20, 1976 published under the caption, 'Why the Coup Was Planned'.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Daily Times*, February 20, 1976, p. 1 The *Daily Times* sarcastically reported the demal under the caption, 'Another Denial by Jack.'
- 8 *Daily Times*, February 20, 1976, p. 1
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 1
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 3
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 3
- 12 In its own editorial, *The Nigerian Standard*, February 20, 1976, p. 1, stated:

General Gowon should be prepared to accept full responsibilities for the bloody Abortive Coup of last Friday which claimed the life of the Head of State, General Murtala Mohammed, and threatened to engulf the country in another major upheaval. And he should be ashamed of himself. No one grudges him the right to seek the leadership of his country. But his vaulting ambitions should not have carried him to the extent of planning to do so over the dead bodies of his fellow Nigerians, especially those who have proved within seven months of taking office that they are better leaders than he.

Thus Gowon was found guilty before he was given a hearing by this newspaper. In the same paper it was reported by Charles Ayede, Jos, that students of the University of Jos had called on the FMG to repatriate Gowon. Some of the placards carried by the students reportedly read - 'Repatriate Gowon to face the gun'; 'Bury Dimka Alive'; 'Gowon shall sleep no more'. Gowon's rule was described as a period of 'administrative incompetence and unbridled corruption', etc.

The *New Nigerian* of February 20, 1976 under the caption 'Gowon's Blood-Stained Hands' wrote

... We call on the Federal Military Government to seek extradition of Gowon for complicity in a most foul murder. He should be put on trial for his vile deeds. Gowon has been quick to say his hands are clean and his conscience is clear. His hands are blood-stained. As for his conscience, well, we cannot see it. (p. 1)

- 13 Letter of 2nd March, 1976
- 14 The quotation of the reference number was probably a mistake. It was the wrong reference number. The letter was not of 6th March, 1976, it was the letter of 23rd August 1975, which granted Gowon the 'privileges and facilities'. In this letter of 23rd August 1975, there was no evidence that it was the decision of the SMC. The letter merely stated that 'the Head of State has approved the following request made by you: ...'
- 15 Letter of 10th March 1976
- 16 Reference: YG/WU/N/1 of 12th March 1976
- 17 Letter of 22nd March 1976
- 18 Chief Godfrey of K J. Amachree and Mr Solomon A. Asemota, are Gowon's legal representatives in Nigeria. They have kindly made available to the author, documents relating to this issue. The part referred to in the text partly comes from their letter of August 14th, 1980 to the Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister for Justice, Mr Richard Akinjide, on behalf of their client, General Yakubu Gowon.
- 19 As an illustration see *Nigerian Herald*, March 16th p. 3; under the caption, 'How to get Gowon here'.
- 20 See caption in *Daily Times*, February 20th, 1976: 'Nigerians urge govt: Bring Back Gowon for Trial'.
- 21 The letter, reference No. YG/WU/N/1 of 31st March 1976
- 22 The summaries by Amachree and Asemota, *loc. cit.*, were very useful.
- 23 Kolo was the out-going High Commissioner to London and the new High Commissioner was Ahmadu Suka.
- 24 In paragraph 28, Gowon said:

Honestly, Your Excellency, it is not that having committed a crime I am now afraid of the consequences. No, I am not guilty. If I were involved I would accept my cross and pay the full price of my folly. But it is not my handwork! You know me well enough and know my experience that if I had been involved I would not have made the mess of it as Lieutenant-Colonel Dimka did. I was not involved and had no wish to be. I have always been against such things. My concern has always been, how do we stop coups - bloody or bloodless ones? The nation needs peace and stability for it to develop and progress.

- 25 Gowon's letter to General Obasanjo, of 7th May 1976, reference YG/WU/N/1
- 26 See extracts of General Obasanjo's broadcast:

Let me assure the nation that throughout the investigations, scrupulous efforts were made to ensure that all those accused were fully heard and given a fair trial. Indeed, it was because of our desire to be meticulous in the pursuit of justice that it took this long to put the issues resulting from the abortive coup behind us.

Regarding Yakubu Gowon, you are aware of the efforts being made to get him back to Nigeria and answer the serious allegations of his complicity in the abortive coup. He has continued to resolutely refuse to come despite the guarantees for his safety and fair trial which the Federal Military Government has given him. In spite of this refusal, we have resisted the expediency of trying

him *in absentia* because of our belief that he should be given a chance to be fully heard and fairly tried

We similarly assured the British Government of Yakubu Gowon's safety and justice . . . . . we had requested the British Government to facilitate Yakubu Gowon's return to Nigeria

The British Prime Minister, through a message brought by his Minister of State for Foreign Affairs has now informed us of the decision of his government not to grant this request. We have made it clear to the British Government that any country which harbours Yakubu Gowon, or for that matter, Dauda Usman or Clement Yildar, is committing an unfriendly act towards the government and people of Nigeria

In the meantime, the Supreme Military Council has decided to dismiss Yakubu Gowon from the Nigerian Army. He will from now be treated as a wanted person to face the allegations against him any time he sets foot on Nigerian soil

(*New Nigerian*, 17 May, 1976, p. 1)

- 27 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Official Gazette* No. 3, Vol. 66, of 18th January 1979, *Government Notice No. 63*, reads.

#### FUGITIVE OFFENDERS WANTED BY THE NIGERIAN POLICE

It is again notified to the general public that the fugitive offenders named hereunder are wanted by the Nigerian Police and other Law Enforcement Agencies for the offences of treason, murder and for other offences under the Criminal Code and the Army Act 1960.

#### FUGITIVE OFFENDERS:

Mr Yakubu Gowon  
Mr Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu  
Captain Dauda Usman  
Sergeant Clement Yildar (p. 90)

If there had been an earlier announcement, there should have been a cross-reference to it. But there is none.

- 28 Federal Government of Nigeria, 'The Military Act (1960), Act No. 26 of 1960' in *Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1960: Ordinances and Subsidiary Legislation, op. cit.*
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. A158
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. A159
- 32 This insight was given by Mr Asemota and I am indebted to him for his legal advice. I am also indebted to both barristers Amachree and Asemota for the legal insight given by their letter *op. cit.*, to Akinjide. But all errors of interpretation and arguments are mine
- 33 The Tribunal was established by Decree No. 8 1976 Federal Republic of Nigeria, 'Treason and Other Offences (Special Military Tribunal) Decree 1976, 23 February 1976' in *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, op. cit.*, p. A43. Also see *Supplement to Official Gazette Extraordinary*, No. 10, Vol. 63, 25 February 1976, Part A. The Board of Inquiry was reportedly headed by General Abisoye. The first Tribunal was headed by Major-General Obada and the Second Tribunal was chaired by Brigadier Eremebor. Members of the Military Board of Inquiry were: 1) Major-General E.O. Abisoye (President) 2) Mr Adamu Suleiman, Deputy Inspector-General of Police; 3) Capt O. Olumide (Nigerian Navy); Lt-Col M.J. Vatsa (Army); Lt-Col Musa Mohammed and Lt I. Dogonyaro. See *The Nigerian Standard*, February 20, 1976, p. 1
- 34 *Dimka's Confession: The Tragedy of a Nation, op. cit.*, p. 9 Italics are mine.
- 35 *Ibid.*, See pp. 9-10 for an interesting account by Dimka.

36 I am indebted to barristers Godfrey Amachree and Solomon Asemota for their letter to Chief Richard Akinjide, August 14, 1980, paragraph 5(b).

37 *Dimka's Confession*, *op. cit.*, p. 40

38 Amachree and Asemota, *loc. cit.*, paragraph 5(c)

39 Among those executed were: 1) Major-General I.D. Bissalla, 2) WO2 Monday Manchong, 3) Staff Sergeant Richard Dungdang, 4) Sgt Sale Pankshin, 5) Lt-Col A.R. Aliyu, 6) Capt M. Parvwang, 7) Capt J.F. Idi, 8) Capt S. Wakian 9) Lt Mohammed, 10) Lt E.L.K. Shelleng, 11) Lt-Col Ayuba Tense, 12) Col A.D.S. Wya, 13) Lt-Col T.K. Adamu, 14) Lt-Col A.B. Umoru, 15) Capt A.A. Aliyu, 16) Capt Augustine Dawurang, 17) Lt William Seril, 18) Major I.B. Rabo, 19) Major K.K. Gagara 20) Capt M.R. Gotip, 21) Major C.D. Dabang, 22) Mr Abdulkarim Zakari (the only civilian – worked with N.B.C.), 23) Lt Peter Cigari, 24) Major Ola Ogunmekan, 25) Lt O. Zagmi, 26) Lt S. Wayah, 27) Sgt Amadu Rege, 28) Sgt Bala Javan, 29) WO2 Sambo Pankshin, 30) WO2 Emmanuel Dakup Sevi, 31) Major J.W. Kasai, 32) Major M.M. Mshellia. In addition, in May seven others were executed; i) Mr. J.D. Gomwalk, ii) Lt-Col Bukar S. Dimka, iii) Lt S. Kwale, iv) WO2 E. Bawa, v) Col Isa Bukar, vi) Major J.K. Afolabi, and vii) Mr H. Shaiyen (Police) See *New Nigerian*, May 17, 1976 p. 1

40 Isaiah Gowon wrote some things down in prison on 12th May 1976, at about 03 15 hrs which made this clear. (This paper is in the possession of this author). He wrote:

I had the opinion that the Board convinced themselves that I went to Kaduna on the 13th to see about the coup. I requested from the Board if they could check from any unit in Kaduna if I was seen there apart from the school of artillery. Also the Board gave a cold shoulder. (end paragraph)

41 Isaiah in his scribble also accused the panel of convicting him of an offence that had been handled and had been administratively dealt with in 1975 – the allegation of his having addressed the press in London in August 1975. General Obasanjo as Chief of Staff, SHO had handled the matter himself. As Isaiah complained in this memo, 'It wasn't fair of the second tribunal to blame me on that, because I took all the necessary actions any one could have taken.' If Isaiah's claims are correct (and we have no reason to doubt him) it would seem that a Gowon needed to be detained for credibility thus Isaiah had to bear the family's cross. Isaiah also alleged that, 'All the board members were sleeping during the trial, at one time or the other. I was sentenced 15 years imprisonment for concealment on above points which has been explained to the board.'

This would tend to confirm rumours that the tribunals were not seriously holding sessions, or had such long sessions that they got tired. This, of course, had grave implications for the accused. It could have made a difference between life and death.

42 It was not surprising that it took a long time for this author to get an interview with him. An attempt was made in 1975, but after his 1976 experiences, it became even more difficult to get to him. I must express my thanks to Prof Ishaya Audu, Prof James O'Connell and Prof Adamu Baikie for their assistance in getting the contact fixed and thus permitting our first contact in 1978 – the beginning of a very good relationship.

43 Interview with *The Rock* (Jos) No. 11 (July–August 1977).

44 *The Punch*, October, 4th 1981, pp 1–2 for the whole interview.

45 On General Gowon's case, General I.B.M. Haruna (now a barrister-at-law) said that Gowon had not been proved procedurally to have committed any crime against the state or any individual for that matter. 'He is being exonerated from mere suspicion and the explosive charge of sentiments and emotions.' *Sunday New Nigerian*, February 6th, 1983, p. 16.

## Chapter 16

# A Laugh at Last

In the battle between Falsehood and Truth, falsehood always wins the first round, but truth wins the last and most durable of all rounds.<sup>1</sup>

The February 13th, 1976 episode had loomed large across the continent into Europe. For Gowon who was living in Europe, it had punctuated his normal life. He had been subjected to psychological strains, political humiliation and public disgrace in Nigeria, and had to accept his lot after the withdrawal of privileges and facilities offered to him earlier by the FMG. Yes, for Gowon, February 13th was a pivotal point in his sojourn in England, and subsequent adjustments in his life were inevitable.

As mentioned above, the government had suspended 'privileges and facilities' extended to Gowon, even before they had had a chance to get Gowon's reply to their request that he should come home and testify before a board of inquiry. Life had become really unbearable in London as a consequence. He had no money and had to live on charity. Contrary to the popular view that an ex-head of state of a 'developing' country always retires to comfort because of ill-gotten wealth stacked away in foreign banks, Yakubu Gowon had no money. This can be cross-checked by those interested.

Apart from the torture of an ex-head of state living in penury, there was the psychological torture. General Gowon had been publicly humiliated by his home government and people for an offence of which he had not been proven guilty. His letters to those in power were not answered, nor were members of the public made aware of them. Even if the public could not have been informed of the letters for one reason or the other, the government could have arrested the wave of attacks on Gowon's person in the media but, unfortunately, the government often made contributions to these in the form of statements, or press briefings. Many Nigerians still believe that Gowon merely refused to testify before the panel. As Gowon later observed, except for his clear conscience, life would have been unbearable for him and for his family. But how did he survive in Britain during this period?

Let us see what happened to the family after the government withdrew its facilities. Since the government was no longer paying for the Finchley Road house, Gowon had to live at the grace of Mr Otti who did not demand any rent from him. Thus again, old friendship rewarded Gowon at another nasty point in his life.

We have already mentioned that about ₦20,000 of his pension benefits had been remitted to him in England before the incident of February 13th. When Gowon got this money, he made a deposit on a house at Broadgate Avenue, Hadley Wood, Herts. He was hoping that as the rest of the money came through to him, he would then complete the payment for the house. Then came the impasse. When the period for completion of the payment was about to expire, in his usual manner when under stress, General Gowon knelt down and prayed to God. Then he sat down and wrote to a number of African heads of state<sup>2</sup> whom he considered his close friends, to help bail him out. Unfortunately, except for one, none replied to his letter (including one of them who was regarded by most people as his good friend). As is often the case, the head of state from whom he probably least expected help, was the one who instructed his ambassador in London to make \$50,000 (fifty thousand US dollars) available to him to pay for the house.<sup>3</sup> Gowon's total saving during his service years and the nine-year period as Head of State amounted to about ₦75,000. He had hoped that this money could be transferred to London. But after the incident of February 1976, the Government of Nigeria made it impossible for him to transfer money from Nigeria. He was thus without money. The assistance by this African head of state was timely, for Gowon wanted the house badly - even though the Ottis did not bother him or his family for even a minute about rent. He immediately used the funds provided by this generous head of state to pay for the house. This is where he now lives - at Broadgate Avenue, Hadley Wood, Hertfordshire.

One expatriate friend of his took over the payment of the school fees of his son, Ibrahim, who attends a public school. Gowon could not afford it. Some of these foreign friends from whom Gowon did not extract any resources while in power, now felt it was time to reward Gowon for his honesty. In all this it must be mentioned that members of his family also helped to give him whatever little support they could offer from time to time. The family was a real source of consolation to the General in his time of crisis. Moses Gowon whose house at Victoria Island was under a contractor finance scheme pleaded with his tenants to extend the number of years and pay him the difference well in advance to enable him remit some money to his brother. He succeeded in doing this. Of course, Dauda, who was in school, never stopped writing his occasional, religiously suffused

epistles to his family members advising them to take heart, remain steadfast and leave everything to God.<sup>4</sup>

Another Nigerian friend of Yakubu Gowon placed Gowon on £500 a month for eighteen months. A wealthy businessman owning an international company, this businessman virtually put Gowon on the company's pay roll – for the company made this money available to Gowon for eighteen months as promised.<sup>5</sup>

The Volkswagen (Passat) car that Gowon had used for many years (not a Rolls-Royce or Mercedes Benz car as some people might have expected) was given to him by a Nigerian Ambassador to a European country. This Volkswagen car is still in Gowon's house. (Some of Gowon's successors who are now retired from the army and are based in London drive luxurious cars and live in comfortable bungalows). There was a time when former President Ahidjo was in London on a State Visit and sent some money to Gowon's children. Thus Gowon survived this period through the generosity of his foreign and Nigerian friends, and the support of his family.

This author witnessed a pathetic situation in 1978 which must be recounted here, for posterity's sake, if nothing else. He had gone to see General Gowon in Hadley Wood in order to interview him. In his usually humble way Gowon picked his guest up at High Barnet station in his Volkswagen which he always drove himself.<sup>6</sup> He had no driver and could not afford one anyway. His valet and nanny had been sent back to Nigeria because the meagre resources coming from philanthropic friends could not maintain them.

One of the most striking first impressions on this author was Gowon's cheerfulness and humility. His joviality puts the individual at home immediately. Within an hour, Yakubu Gowon and the author chatted freely as if they had known each other for years. The author called at the house again many times for interviews in 1978 before he proceeded to the United States.<sup>7</sup> On the last occasion the author had to ask Gowon a question that had been bugging him ever since the first meeting. Despite Gowon's cheerfulness, the author noticed intuitively some uneasiness occasionally. It was more apparent from his wife's countenance (though she remained nice, hospitable and cheerful) than from Gowon's.

It was then that Gowon revealed that during that same week another unsettling issue had again stung the family. General Gowon had just finished his bachelor's degree in Political Science. He immediately registered for his post-graduate studies with the hope that if he worked hard enough, he could get his doctorate in a few years. But just before the new session began, an efficient officer of the Home Office had written to Gowon saying that unless the latter had up to £7,000.00 (sterling) deposited with his University to cover

tuition and other expenses, any request for the renewal of his visa would be turned down.

At this point in time, the Gowons did not have that amount of money. In fact, Yakubu Gowon was even more worried about his son's school fees than his own problems. In pensive but obviously dejected mood, Gowon remarked that he was a victim of many problems because of his honesty. If he had been a dishonest Head of State, this issue would not have arisen to create mental and physical tension for his family. The tragedy of it all was that most Nigerians did not understand the ordeal he was going through, and some people had even expressed views in Nigerian dailies that Gowon was living comfortably in London. Even in his dejection, like a military officer, he quickly collected himself and even tried to console the author, who was saddened by this issue. Gowon advised him not to worry and that he had taken up the matter with the government. He believed that all would be well.

Later when the author phoned from the United States, he was relieved to hear that it had all been a mistake on the part of an over-zealous officer who was applying rules across the board. But Gowon was not a regular student and his position in Britain was special, like other cases before his. It was later understood that the British government made amends and even disciplined the particular officer involved.<sup>8</sup>

The essence of this recapture of Gowon's experience is obvious. The man really had no money and therefore would have experienced untold hardship, but for the support of his friends (foreign and Nigerian) and his family. A corrupt Head of State could never have allowed himself go through the hardships experienced by the Gowons in London. Gowon was not pretending. It is not usual to suffer all sorts of hardships in order to cover up ill-gotten wealth stacked away in foreign banks. If Gowon had the money, his pride, his sense of fairness and honesty, would never have allowed him to take charitable offers. During all this, Gowon had to continue receiving his guests and friends and this involved some entertainment. But he was generally outwardly unperturbed, always hoping that the future would have brighter rays of light to shine on him.

He continued his postgraduate programme assiduously. In 1979, Warwick University transformed his Master's course to a doctoral course. Gowon was evidently enthused and saw it is a new challenge. As he told this writer, 'At least the doctorate no one can take away from me as they took away my generalship.' He worked hard and read widely and he often took on the author in academic debate over certain political issues.

No doubt, one of the greatest things which happened to Gowon in

England was his decision to get back to school. Lacking the arrogance and effrontery of Ojukwu, it is clear to anyone who has been talking to him over these years that the man has experienced tremendous intellectual growth. He does not show off because he apparently has no deflated ego for which to compensate, but his newly acquired intellectual power comes quietly but effectively to the other party in communication. His perceptions are sharp, broad and yet problem or issue-focused. Warwick did do some work on this amiable former Military Head of State, who has been writing his Ph.D. Thesis on Economic Integration in West Africa — (ECOWAS).

While studying in London Gowon had not forgotten that he deserved more justice and fairness than had been meted out to him by the Obasanjo regime. He waited however for time to gradually expose the ground. A new civilian administration had taken over the reins of government on October 1, 1979. Gowon had hoped that his communication with General Obasanjo would have been passed on to the new President — Alhaji Shehu Shagari. At least, he hoped that Obasanjo would have briefed Shagari about his case.

But Gowon was taken aback by the report in the Nigerian press captioned, 'Ojukwu, Gowon have queries to answer.' The *New Nigerian* of Friday, 7 December, 1979, under the above caption, reported Shagari's press conference at Monrovia Airport, Liberia. In the report, the *New Nigerian* stated:

Former secessionist leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and Nigeria's former Military Head of State Mr Yakubu Gowon, have questions to answer whenever they return from exile, President Shehu Shagari had declared . . . Mr Yakubu Gowon was head of state from 1966 through the Civil War years to July, 1975 when he was removed from office in a bloodless coup while he was attending a summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Kampala, Uganda.

After the July, 1975 coup that brought late General Murtala Muhammed to power, Gowon left Kampala for Britain where he has since stayed as a political science student.

But in February 1976, General Murtala Mohammed was killed in an abortive coup led by Bukar Sukar Dimka. Mr Gowon was believed to have had a hand in the coup attempt and was declared a wanted person.

President Shagari did not expatiate on the fate that awaits the two men in exile but public statement has thrown light on the Federal Government's stand on the issue which has generated great interest since democratic civil rule was restored in October this year.<sup>9</sup>

General Gowon contacted his legal representatives Messrs Godfrey Amachree and Solomon Asemota, for whom lawyers demanded and got all documents relating to the case. The lawyers then came to the conclusion that the former Attorney-General, Al Obasanjo, had not made Gowon's letter available to General Abacha Shagari, otherwise Shagari's reaction would have been different.

On 14th August 1980, the Attorney-General and Federal Minister for Justice, R.A. Akinjide dated August 14, 1980 and titled, *Re: General Gowon (retired)*, the lawyers appealed to him to direct the courts under section 160 (1) (10) of the 1979 Nigerian Constitution, to deal with the matter quickly. The lawyers recounted the events of February 1976 and the two tribunals set up by Decree No. 8, 1976, pointing out that contrary to Decree No. 8, 1976, some of the accused had not been given prison terms or discharged under the provisions of the Tribunals, were retired and condemned by the second tribunal headed by Brigadier Eremebor.

The lawyers contended that the trials of the alleged plotters were contrary to the rules of fairness and justice since they were held in secret and the evidence against them and the nature of the charges were unknown to the public. In addition, they argued that if General Dimka had incriminated General Gowon, this would have been established since members of the SMC had wanted to link Gowon to the plot by any means. Yet the case against Gowon, they argued, was based on Dimka's confessional statement to which Gowon had no opportunity to react:

- i) that Dimka's visit to Gowon was no proof of Gowon's involvement in the plot;
- ii) that the statement of 'take care and make no mistake' should be given its plain than a single meaning - it could also have been addressed to an agitated Dimka to avoid anything that would harm his military career. By law, this double interpretation means that the statement is one favourable to the accused;
- iii) that a man's confession is only evidence against himself and not against his accomplice; that it was 'a misdirection to take into account against one accused an evidence which is a confession made by another;' and
- iv) that Dimka's visit to the British High Commission in Lagos clearly showed that Gowon was not party to the plot and that he had only been in Togo in anticipation of the coup and not to participate in it.

The lawyers then reviewed events from February 1976, in order to demonstrate the FMG's bias in favour of the client's innocence and good intention as shown by the evidence.

March 31st and May 7, 1976. They wondered why the SMC found it necessary to lure Gowon to Nigeria even though it had set up a tribunal to deal with matters related to coup.

Beyond clearing Gowon's name, the lawyers raised three other legal issues - i) the question of granting their client a pardon or reprieve; ii) the restoration of his pension; and iii) his constitutional position as a member of the Council of State.

On the first issue, the lawyers referred to section 161 of the 1979 constitution which gives the President powers of pardon.<sup>11</sup> Pardon means clearing 'a person of all infamy - quality of being infamous or being a public disgrace, and from all consequences of the offence from which it is granted.' They then went on to make their conclusion on this issue:

It is our submission that our client has not been tried or convicted of an offence and therefore the President cannot exercise his powers under section 161 of the Constitution. We believe that to grant him a pardon, presupposes that he has been tried, found guilty and convicted, when in fact he has not even been convicted. In our opinion the facts do not warrant the exercise by the President, of his power to grant a pardon. If any pardon is granted, we will advise our client to reject a Reprieve.<sup>12</sup>

This was in the background of numerous public demands that Gowon should be pardoned by the President. While their client advised to all those who made such calls, they could not advise them to say such as 'he is innocent of any crime'.<sup>13</sup>

The second point raised by the lawyers was the withdrawal of General Gowon's pension. After recounting the facts of the withdrawal of 'privileges and facilities' being enjoyed by Gowon, the lawyers illustrated the consequences of this act. Gowon in London and how he managed to survive through the generosity of his friends and family members. They expressed surprise that no explanation had been given to Gowon for the withdrawal of his pensions. They

As you know, pension is a right and not a privilege. If it is to be taken away, it must be in accordance with the law. We have studied the provisions of the Pension Act of the Federation of Nigeria 1958 and various Decisions of the courts and reached the conclusion that our client's pension cannot be taken away. We have advised our client that you were to advise the Government accordingly, otherwise we will be forced to contest the issue in Court.<sup>14</sup>

After this submission, General Gowon's lawyers then made their final point on the constitutional position of General Gowon as a member of the Council of State. Section 140 (1) (a) of the 1979 Constitution had created a new institution in Nigeria, the *Council of State*. The composition of the Council includes all former heads of government and all former presidents.<sup>15</sup> The lawyers therefore argued that having been the Head of FMG for nine years Gowon was entitled to membership of this council, as soon as his name was cleared.

Gowon's lawyers also drew Mr R.A. Akinjide's attention to the fact that they still referred to Gowon as a 'General' (retired), not in defiance of the federal government but in accordance with the military law governing the 'forfeiture of the Rank of a General in the Reserve List'.<sup>16</sup> After a close study of this law, the lawyers claimed that the purported dismissal of their client was a nullity, in which case anyone was at liberty to ignore the said dismissal. Moreover, they argued that

... our client has not been called upon to appear before any Army Council on any charge and up to date he has not received any notification to that effect. He had not been convicted of treason or felony or found guilty by any tribunal. He first heard of his dismissal on the *Voice of America*, and subsequently read about it in some Nigerian newspapers and *West Africa*.<sup>17</sup>

They then went on to submit that their client could not be stripped of his rank or forfeit his office because 'he has not been convicted of treason or felony. Only those who have been convicted of treason or felony, and have not received a free pardon can forfeit their ranks.' Thus, according to current laws, Gowon could be referred to as 'General Gowon (retired)' and this, the lawyers claimed, they did.

In conclusion, General Gowon's lawyers appealed to the Attorney-General to see that justice was done, since Gowon was being 'wrongfully accused of a crime which he neither committed nor counselled its commission'. A copy of the letter was sent to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The lawyers waited for a reply which did not come. As their patience ran out, they threatened to raise the issue in the open at the Commonwealth Law Conference in Lagos. As this was likely to embarrass the Federal Government, the Attorney-General promised to take up the issue with the appropriate functionaries of the government and subsequently get in touch with the lawyers. For the lawyers, there was no doubt that they would have gone to the courts if the Federal Government delayed action. The whole issue was complicated. A court case would have opened up new issues. If it was

found that the trials were 'unfair', families of those who had been executed could raise 'hell' for the government.

Meanwhile, General Gowon wanted to ensure that he got his own piece of justice to which every Nigerian was entitled. On 7 August 1980, he wrote to the President to point out that his case had not been reviewed and requested that justice be done.<sup>18</sup>

Again, on 28 August 1981, about a year later, General Gowon wrote to the President. In this letter General Gowon reminded the President that:

It is now over five years that I was falsely accused of crime and publicly humiliated by the leadership and the Government of Nigeria. I had lived under a cloud but for the knowledge that my conscience is clear and hands clean, life would have been more unbearable not only for me but also for other members of my family. I have been denied my rights, both human and material by the Obasanjo regime, your predecessor's Government. My youngest brother, Isaiah, is still in detention just because he is a Gowon.<sup>19</sup>

He then implored the President to ignore the 'political pressures' on him, in order to take the difficult decision 'to redress the injustices meted out to me and others.' He sincerely hoped that the President would instruct his Attorney-General and the Army Council to review his and other cases for appropriate action.

On the same day, 28 August, 1981, Gowon also wrote to the President of the Army Council, Ministry of Defence, Lagos. The letter was entitled, 'Forfeiture of Rank and Rights, Wrongful Dismissal, etc - (General Y. Gowon).' In this letter of representation to the Army Council, Gowon traced the events of 1976, the Dimka attempted coup, the FMG's statement, and his two letters of explanation to General Obasanjo, to which he got no reply. He prayed the President of the Army Council to bring his complaint to the council.

Gowon went further to express his dismay at some of the events which took place. For example, he stated that he never knew about his dismissal formally.

On or about the 15th or 16th May, 1976 I heard over the radio - *Voice of America* - that I was stripped of my rank, all honours and entitlements, etc., I was no longer to be referred to as 'General' but a 'Mr'. I subsequently read about it in various Nigerian and foreign newspapers, magazines and journals. I am yet to receive official confirmation of these statements and publications. As a most senior officer on both the reserve list and the active list, I believe I am at least entitled to a courtesy of a reply.<sup>20</sup>

Gowon then recounted how his facilities had been suspended and that he did not actually know which body, the Army Council or the SMC, had taken the decision, given varied reports on the issue. He informed the President of the Army Council<sup>21</sup> that he had also written to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on this issue since the beginning of the Second Republic. In an apparently 'moaning' tone, Gowon stressed, 'My honour and that of my profession, the army, is at stake. The Army Council can and must put the record straight'. He hoped that his letter would be brought to the attention of the council so as to put 'the records straight for the good name of the Nation and the army, which some of us loved very dearly and would not do anything to cause it dishonour.'

There is ample evidence to show that Gowon's letter and those of his lawyers got to the quarters to which they were addressed. The author's research showed that President Shehu Shagari was very much in favour of disposing of the matter. A good friend and a former Commissioner under General Gowon, Shagari is reportedly very grateful to the General. He believed, it is understood, that his appointment as Federal Commissioner of Finance (virtually Vice-Chairman of the Federal Executive Council) by General Gowon had heightened his political visibility. He linked his present fortune to such political visibility as he had attained under General Gowon's government.<sup>22</sup>

However, there were a number of political forces with which President Shagari had to contend. There were some politically ambitious young men from the Northern states for whom General Gowon's return was ominous. These young people in politics believed that Gowon still had a great following and credibility, especially in the light of the poor administrative records of his successor's regimes. These men feared Gowon's political shadow which they thought would dwarf them. They were scared of a politically credible Gowon turning out to be Nigeria's Peron. Members of this group never believed Gowon's often repeated statements that he had had enough of government and administration.

The other group comes from the Eastern states, mainly of Ibo stock. For these people, the configuration of the National Party of Nigeria provided a conducive platform for bargaining on behalf of Odumegwu Ojukwu.

Those who did not support Gowon's return (politicians and military men alike) raised the issue of security; what would happen if Gowon came back to Nigeria? The main argument was that the process of reconciliation after the Civil War remained incomplete as long as Ojukwu still remained in exile while his advisers had returned home. The variant in the argument was that both Gowon and Ojukwu had committed criminal acts against the state and therefore

both men should ride back on the same presidential bandwagon of pardon. Thus Ojukwu was to ride back to Nigeria tied to the coat-tails of Gowon. The nature of public debates on this issue amply illustrates this trend of thought.

The other salient constituency to take into consideration was the army. In the army were (and are) some of the actors who served in the SMC and in the government that had meted out punishment to Gowon. The issue was whether or not these characters would take kindly to Gowon's return. One argument was that they would not and that Shagari would be courting a coup if he cleared Gowon of allegations made against him. The other intra-military argument was that the decision to malign Gowon was made by a few military men and that the bulk of the army or soldiers never really believed Gowon was involved in the Dimka blunder anyway.

Yet others believed that the argument of security was merely an obscurantist ploy to dissuade the President from taking appropriate action.

The issue of Gowon's return became so politicized at a point that President Shagari's dilemma was obvious. To what extent would Gowon's 'pardon' alienate some young Northern politicians (mainly of Hausa-Fulani stock) some of whom were either in Shagari's cabinet or close to him in Lagos? For this group, if Gowon had to come back or be 'pardoned', then it had to be linked to Ojukwu's case. This would, of course, have placed Gowon and Ojukwu on the same political equilibrium as 'pardoned' criminals. Gowon's credibility would have been further abraded, if he accepted it. Thus the Eastern group got a booster of support from north of the Niger.

For President Shagari, this second issue was not any less difficult. To what extent would you equate the case of a well-known secessionist with that of an ex-Head of State who had fought to keep Nigeria one, and against whom allegations of 'treasonable acts' had not been proven? Could Shagari afford to lose his Ibo constituency, an area he was in fact bending over backwards to woo by all means? Would Gowon accept a 'pardon'? Did Gowon's lawyers not make their stand clear on that issue? All these issues contributed to delay, as President Shagari (using Gowon's technique) waited for a more opportune moment and an appropriate atmosphere for tackling the issue.

On the issue of linking Gowon's 'pardon' to Ojukwu, Shagari managed to wriggle out of that by utilizing traditional imagery. This was the imagery of two fallen trees, one on top of the other. In order to remove these trees, one had to remove the tree on top (the last to fall), before one can take on the one below. Thus Ojukwu was the first tree to fall; Gowon fell on top. In order to remove Ojukwu, Gowon had first to be lifted, and then Ojukwu could follow suit. This

was a clever compromise. But it had not resolved all the problems.

What about the Gowon 'pardon'? Gowon rejected any 'pardon'. He felt he had done nothing wrong to warrant a pardon and insisted on his name being cleared. If the case went to the courts, the government was likely to be embarrassed given the shoddiness of procedure followed by the Obasanjo regime in dealing with Gowon's case. As we shall see later, President Shagari again handled this tactfully.

The issue of opposition from the military was overcome anyway. In the first place, it was more imaginary than real. In the second place, there was no reason why a few people still within the army should create a situation which would have eventually embarrassed the army. If the lawyers had gone to the courts, some embarrassment to the army would have, perhaps, been unavoidable. In the absence of an actual court case, this was still at the level of hypothesis and speculation. Most Nigerians were not aware that Gowon's lawyers were operating behind the scenes.

Finally, in his broadcast of October 1, 1981, Alhaji Shehu Shagari rescinded the order contained in Government Notice No. 63, 1979 which had declared Gowon a 'fugitive offender wanted by the police.'<sup>23</sup> In the broadcast, Alhaji Shehu Shagari announced that he believed that a spirit of magnanimity and restraint ought to be injected into the political system. He had, therefore, consulted the National Council of State to give due consideration to review the cases of people connected with the February 13, 1976 events. In addition to rescinding the orders which had declared Gowon a wanted man, President Shagari also released thirteen other people serving prison terms in connection with this abortive coup.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, again, in a subtle political manoeuvre, President Shagari resolved the issue. He had ordered that the order which had declared Gowon a wanted person be rescinded. In the first place, he had not 'pardoned' Gowon. He only quashed an order which had declared Gowon a publicly wanted criminal. Thus Gowon was free to come back to Nigeria and to move around freely. Since it was not a pardon, Gowon and his lawyers would not be opposed to it. In the second place, this action of the President neither officially restored to Gowon his rank nor his pension benefits. While this placated opponents of the Gowon return, it stored a legacy of problems for the future which Gowon's lawyers are waiting patiently to see resolved, as it was reliably understood, or take appropriate legal action. In fact, Shagari's subtlety could be seen in his broadcast which classified the various offenders. Gowon was, according to Shagari, *believed* to have been only *remotely* connected to the Dimka plot.

The public reaction to the announcement rescinding the orders on Gowon was spontaneous and overwhelmingly positive within Nigeria.

It is not surprising that some Nigerian newspapers refer to Gowon as having been 'pardoned'. Such an error may have been genuine. In the government gazette and other publications there was no reference to a Gowon 'pardon'.

Given the nature of this new found freedom, Gowon gladly accepted the decision to rescind the order. In any case, the Government had been in constant contact with General Gowon and had known his feelings. For Gowon, the announcement was a personal vindication. It was tantamount to clearing his name and a confirmation of his stand all through the crises.

Gowon then issued a statement (contrary to Frederick Forsyth's contention)<sup>25</sup> in which he thanked President Shehu Shagari and all those who had, in one way or the other contributed to the new development which now permitted him to go back to his country as a free person. In a BBC programme later, Gowon was quoted as having requested President Shehu Shagari to complete the process of amnesty and reconciliation by pardoning Ojukwu of his crimes against the Nigerian State. Unlike Ojukwu, who had smiled at the news of Gowon's overthrow in 1975 and had made perjorative remarks about Gowon, in Gowon's moment of joy and laughter, he did not forget Ojukwu.<sup>26</sup>

In the long run, Gowon could laugh at last. His humiliation and public disgrace by the Obasanjo regime had now been rectified. He felt happy that he had, at last, been vindicated. However, as mentioned earlier, if Gowon had been vindicated, two other problems still remained – his rank and his pension. These are problems Gowon seems ready to be patient about for a while especially since former President Shagari had, personally, been quite understanding. But the issues transcend former President Shagari's nicety, and may surface again. The new military regime in Nigeria is likely to grapple with this issue at a later date.

Gowon had since 1981 been busy with his Ph.D thesis and has now been awarded a Ph.D in Politics from the University of Warwick. His sojourn in London had been marked by vicissitudes of life to which he had adequately adjusted himself at different points in time. But his acquisition of a Ph.D degree has made his period in exile worthwhile. For one who had reached the highest rank in the military to have begun an academic career late in life, and even more, to have embarked on an advanced degree amidst all the troubles he had been through, showed Gowon to be a very remarkable man, a diligent and determined man who hardly yields to obstacles along his way. He is a real soldier, a gentleman and an assiduous worker.

Since 1981, his credibility in Nigeria has soared. Mr Ojukwu ironically even contributed to Gowon's heightened credibility. Although Gowon was free to return home after October 1981, he had

quietly stayed out of the country and kept out of politics. Unlike Gowon, Ojukwu immediately rushed home after his pardon in the middle of 1982. The pomp with which he re-entered the polity; the arrogance he has since displayed; his controversial statements and the tone of his entry into Nigerian politics, have raised much dust in Nigeria. His personality has been attacked by his foes and friends alike. Those who had earlier on seen Ojukwu as the mystical champion of Ibo cause, now find that as the rays of the political searchlight expose Ojukwu to closer scrutiny, the mystical aura around him is being constantly dissipated by his friends and foes. People even questioned the nature of his pardon, an unconditional pardon - and wondered whether secession did not pay after all.<sup>27</sup>

Paradoxically, Ojukwu's re-entry and his behaviour was a pointed contrast to Gowon's attitude as the ideal behaviour of a soldier-statesman. Many of Ojukwu's erstwhile colleagues in secession such as Col Effiong and Col Madiebo even called on him to emulate Gowon's lofty and noble distance from party politics and its concomitants in the country.

In fact, a delegation of Plateau State traditional leaders had gone to London to see Gowon and offered to build a house for him in the Plateau State of Nigeria. As Gowon remarked, he belongs to the whole country and would always act as a nationalist. But he was touched by the gesture of the chiefs and conceded to their requests. The One Million Naira Appeal Fund for building a house for Gowon was organized and launched in Jos by Plateau State traditional rulers on 6th November, 1982. Those who attended the ceremony came from all parts of the country. As Gowon observed in his letter to his elder brother, Mr Peter Gowon, on the occasion:

... Kindly express my sincere appreciation to his Highness Bong Gwom Jos and all the Chiefs and People of Plateau for their thoughtful consideration for my welfare. I wish them all success in their efforts. I consider it noble that this sincere gesture is being joined in by many other fellow Nigerian citizens. It is gratifying that by this singular action the people of Nigeria are rewarding honesty, integrity and selfless service in our public life. That has been my stand all along. Those engaged in the service of our people must live by the highest level of probity and total dedication to the welfare and good of the people they are called upon to serve. My thanks to all those who are involved in organizing the Gowon House Fund Raising and to all people throughout the country for their generous contribution.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This is a paraphrase and modification of Mujibur Rahman's statement. Mujibur Rahman was the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh.
- 2 General Gowon had written to six African heads of state, including the Head of State of Togo, Cameroon, Uganda and Liberia. He only asked for financial assistance from Presidents Abidjo, Eyadema and Tolbert. But generally he merely informed the others of the state in which he was and the difficulty he was encountering.
- 3 The author has the name of this very generous head of state, but discretion prevents the publication of the name. The total cost of the house is £55,000 and is freehold.
- 4 These letters are in the possession of the author. The length of this book prevents me from including some of these most brilliant and elucidating letters as appendices to this book. These letters revealed a great deal about the family and its belief in God.
- 5 The author has the name of this wealthy businessman. One is not sure that the publication of his generous offers will not eventually embarrass him. Hence our discretion has fallen on the side of anonymity. This businessman is Bendelite.
- 6 Gowon often went to pick up his guests from the station.
- 7 The trip to the United States was not connected with the Gowon research. The author was on a Fulbright-Hays Foundation Programme to the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University, Lexington, KY, USA for one academic year.
- 8 This aspect was not cross-checked.
- 9 *New Nigerian*, 7 December, 1979, p. 1 and p. 17.
- 10 Under this provision, the Attorney-General of the Federation shall have power
  - (i) to institute and undertake criminal proceedings against any person before any court of law in Nigeria, other than a court-martial, in respect of any offence created by or under any Act of the National Assembly;
  - (ii) to take over and continue any such criminal proceedings that may have been instituted by any other authority or person; and
  - (iii) to discontinue at any stage before judgement is delivered any such criminal proceedings instituted or undertaken by him or any other authority or person.
- 11 Section 161 of the constitution provides that:
  - (1) President may,
    - (a) grant any person concerned with or convicted of any offence created by an Act of the National Assembly a pardon, either free or subject to lawful conditions;
    - (b) grant to any person a respite, either for an indefinite or for a specified period, of the execution of any punishment imposed on that person for such an offence;
    - (c) substitute a less severe form of punishment for any punishment imposed on that person for such an offence; or
    - (d) remit the whole or any part of any punishment imposed on that person for such offence or of any penalty or forfeiture otherwise due to the State on account of such an offence.
  - (2) The powers of the President under subsection (1) of this section shall be exercised by him after consultation with the Council of State.

(3) The President, in accordance with the advice of the Council of State, may exercise his powers under subsection (1) of this section in relation to persons concerned with offences against naval, military or air-force law or convicted or sentenced by a court martial. (p. A188)

12 Amachree and Asemota, *loc. cit.* p. 9

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, p. 10

15 Section 140 (1) (a) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979, third Schedule, Part 1 (c) states, 'The Council of State shall comprise the following persons, namely: (c) all former Presidents of the Federation and all former Heads of the Governments of the Federation'.

16 Amachree and Asemota, *loc. cit.*, 11

17 *Ibid.*, p. 17

18 Letter from Yakubu Gowon to the President, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, YG/WU/N/6 of 7 August 1980.

19 Yakubu Gowon's letter to the President, dated 28 August, 1981 YG/WU/N/18.

20 Yakubu Gowon's letter to the President of the Army Council reference YG/WU/N/19 of 28 August, 1981. It is reliably understood that this letter was received and that General Gowon was advised to withdraw it so as not to cause further complications. His lawyers wrote for such withdrawal.

21 The incumbent here is the same as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, who is the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

22 During his administration, President Shagari extended gestures of goodwill and generosity to the General including permitting the government to make available to General Gowon a total of £40,000 for his upkeep.

23 President Shagari's announcement was later gazetted in Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Official Gazette* 29th October, 1981, on p. 1265. It was contained in *Government Notice* No. 918 titled 'Amendment of Government Notice No. 63 of 1979' which read:

It is hereby notified to the general public that the entry relating to Mr Yakubu Gowon shall be deleted from the list contained in Government Notice No. 63 published in the Federal Republic of Nigeria *Official Gazette*, No. 3, Vol. 66, of 18th January 1979, and in any newspapers or other publication whatsoever containing any notice or advertisement in similar or like terms to the said Government Notice.

- 24 Those who were released from serving different prison terms were; Captain Isaiah Gowon; Mr S.K. Dimka, former Police Commissioner, Kwara State; Mrs Helen Gomwalk; Captain C. Wuyep; Captain A. A. Maidodo, W O 2 E. Isaiah; Sergeant J. Bupwada; Lt A. Walbe; Major A.K. Abang; Mr Gyang Pam (Police); Mr S. Anyadufu and Mr J. Inuwa. Captain Dauda Usman and Sergeant Clement Yildar were not pardoned by Shehu Shagan. They were still at large and had never been arrested by the police; nor were they tried in absentia or otherwise. See *New Nigerian*, 2nd October 1981, p. 1 and p. 11.
- 25 In Frederick Forsyth's *Emeka* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1982) p. 133, Forsyth claimed.

From London, the day after the announcement, Yakubu Gowon issued a statement of almost unbelievable gracelessness. Not a word of appreciation to President Shagari; not a word of thanks to those who had supported the *small campaign* inside Nigeria for his return; not even an acknowledgement to the British government who had helped and protected him for six years. Just a rather rude statement that he might consider returning in a year or so when he had finished his studies. Not surprisingly his supporters in Nigeria transferred

their attentions to the liberated persons who had been in prison since the murder of Mohammed six years earlier. (*Italics are the author's, to highlight the bias.*)

- 26 *Ibid.* on page 124, Mr Forsyth claims that when Ojukwu heard about Gowon's overthrow, 'He smiled at the news.'
- 27 There have been numerous reactions against Ojukwu by military men and civilians among whom are, Major-General Garba (*retired*), Brigadier Adekunle (*retired*), General T.Y. Danjuma (*retired*), Col Effiong (Ojukwu's former aide who announced the surrender), Col Sani Bello (*retired*) and General Haruna (*retired*), to mention a few. *New Nigerian* 6th February, 1983, p. 16
- 28 This is a personal letter written by General Gowon to his brother, Mr Peter Gowon, dated November 4, 1982.



## Conclusion

That was Nigeria's Gowon, and Yakubu's Nigeria. In 1936, at the age of two, Gowon had migrated with his father from Tuwan in present Plateau State to Wusasa, Zaria. From a poor, humble but religious family that was satisfied with its lot, little Yakubu grew up as an amiable, humane and forthright child. He imbibed the exuberance and forthrightness of his mother as well as the unruffled, moral and passive characteristics of his father. His early background no doubt affected his performances later on in life, as we have shown. He could not forget his Christian up-bringing nor his humble background, but was proud of both.

From a memorable school life in Wusasa (towards which he still has great nostalgic feelings), Yakubu Gowon enrolled at Government College, Zaria, at the end of which he found himself praying and tossing a coin for a career. His toss fell on the military. Yet given his background, one which held the Bible on high and close to the heart, would a military career be compatible with his beliefs? Military life is symbolized by the sword and it is a career that exhorts maiming and killing to defend the state. Christian religion has the cross as its symbol. How compatible are the cross in one hand and the sword in the other? In situations of a crusade, perhaps this would be understandable. But did Gowon find himself in a situation of something near a crusade? Yes, for thirty months when he tried to keep Nigeria together.

Very often it is forgotten that the ambivalence in Gowon's character throughout his rule can be traced to his background. He had learnt from early childhood to be friendly and trusting. He had learnt to abide by his words. He thought that everyone would behave in such a manner. If in inter-personal relations credulity is relatively an asset, in public office, it could be quite an expensive political item to be exhibited. Gowon's experience in office typically illustrates the problems of transferring on to the political stage such personal traits as friendliness, an overly trusting attitude towards colleagues and a belief that others would always keep their part of their bargain. His lieutenants knew that this personal strong point was also Gowon's

weakness. They exploited it and later eroded Gowon's legitimacy. Thus, like a Shakespearian hero, Gowon's admirable qualities were partly responsible for his political fall.

If Gowon had tossed a coin to choose a military career, uncanny coincidences shot him meteorically into the political limelight. He had arrived in Nigeria only two days before the first military coup in the country and found himself laden with the onerous duty of putting down or suppressing it. He had, in fact, escaped death, again by coincidence, and later emerged as Nigeria's leader. Soon he was saddled with the duty of 'keeping Nigeria one' and establishing the basis of the future survival of the country.

A military man, Gowon hated bloodshed. In fact it may be said that he dreaded it. The moralistic posture he took during the Nigerian crisis and after the Civil War illustrates another ambivalence emanating from his character. Every colleague of his accepts that Yakubu Gowon was a good soldier, albeit, a decent, polite and friendly one. Yet he could not bring himself to unleash punitive measures or violence on his colleagues unless he absolutely had to do so. Thus when he realized he was to be overthrown, he preferred not to shed any blood in order to stay in power. Again during the crises of December 1974 and January 1975 when he was being urged by his colleagues to take military action against those who were responsible for strikes and other activities, he hesitated. As shown in this book, his early background, the passiveness and restraint he picked up from his father and his early religious background, always served as 'brakes' on him.

For those colleagues who hardly knew this, Gowon was not a strong military leader, even though he might have been a good soldier. This hesitation often created an impression of indecision and weakness - two cardinal criticisms of Yakubu Gowon.

Having linked his early background to his later performance as a leader, it is pertinent to point out that his background prepared him for the role of a *reconciliation leader* in Nigeria's *reconciliation system*. Nigeria's Yakubu is a cool-headed man, temperate and not easily ruffled. A moderate in most things, his early background as explained above equipped him with the capabilities to listen and to help find compromises. He is friendly and humble and easily excites the confidence of acquaintances.

Even his natural origins made Gowon a good compromise in the Nigerian setting. Coming from a minority group he was quite well placed to mediate among Nigeria's major ethnic groups. In addition, like Tanzania's Nyerere or Ghana's Nkrumah, coming from a small group, he could not easily be accused of being a champion of ethnic domination of other groups. If Yakubu had hesitated about his posting to Ibadan after his graduation from Sandhurst, it proved to

be a valuable asset to him. Throughout his working life, he was never posted to the old Northern Region. He therefore made many friends in the South.

Thus, Nigeria at its height of crisis, had a cool-headed young man at the helm. He hailed from a minority group in the middlebelt, grew up in a Northern city, trained overseas, and worked throughout in the South. Coming from a peripherally Northern group, he (at least during the crisis) extracted the support of the North. Yet as a Northern Christian who had lived in the South and often communed with his fellow Christians in Southern churches, also appealed to the Southerners. Gowon was thus appropriately equipped with the traits and advantages of a reconciliation leader in Nigeria's ethnoregional system.

As a leader Gowon performed well and as pointed out in this book, was responsible largely for the building of a new Nigerian State, and the establishment of a foundation for the building of a nation. Most of the infrastructures (the network of airports and roads especially) in Nigeria today were initiated and started by the Gowon regime. Some of the programmes were completed by his successors and he bequeathed to them a number of projects on the drawing board. Gowon conceived of a Nigeria that would be so economically strong that it would have a great leverage in Africa and the world. He saw a vision of not only a geographic and demographic African giant, but an economic giant as well.

Hence, the planning and execution of the Second Development Plan, 1970-74, and the Third Development Plan of 1975-80 had laudable objectives. If the Third Development Plan had been as successfully executed as the 1970-74 Plan, Nigeria would have been appreciably different from what it is today. The expansion of the number of universities owed much to his regime. He introduced the Universal Primary Education Scheme, which later failed to work. If his successors had continued with this laudable programme, the problems Nigeria has today with primary and secondary education would have been minimized. By the time Gowon was overthrown, he had accumulated quite some foreign reserves - over two and a half billion naira - for Nigeria, thanks to the soaring petronaira. These were quickly expended by his successors.

His very act of creation of states was a masterstroke in structural engineering in a situation of crisis. The demands for additional states later showed the importance of his action. Similarly, he carried out other symbolic, but functional programmes, such as the change from left to right-hand drive; change of currency from pounds sterling to naira (and decimalization of this currency), and the change of Nigeria's weights and measures to the metric system.

From Armed Forces battered, apparently irredeemably, in 1966, Gowon not only mobilized an army to fight a successful civil war, but

came out of it with an army larger and better organized than he had inherited. He did not, however, grapple with the issue of demobilization which became a very knotty issue for the armed forces. In foreign affairs, Gowon lent dignity to Nigeria's stand in Africa and beyond. He was the first Nigerian Head of State to visit China and the Soviet Union. His Afro-centric foreign policy yielded rewards as extra-African powers quickly recognized the salience of Nigeria in African affairs and the OAU – of which Gowon was once the chairman. These few illustrations indicate the many positive contributions of General Yakubu Gowon who has been appropriately described as the 'father' of the New Nigerian State.

But how and why did this state-builder and political engineer fall from popularity to obscurity, from the position of the leader of Nigeria to one whose head was being demanded by the masses? In this book we have shown that Gowon was a great reconciliation leader. There is no greater evidence of this than the reconciliation he effected after the Civil War. He not only put his foot down when his colleagues wanted the secessionists to be tried and punished, Nuremberg style, but offered to resign if the SMC would not accept his generous gestures towards the Ibos.<sup>1</sup> His magnanimity shocked the world and even surprised Western sceptics and cynics. In fact, it may even be contended that Gowon made reconciliation in Nigeria more possible, and he nursed the wounds of war to faster healing than any country in the world with similar experiences had managed.

After the Civil War, we have argued, Gowon was overly optimistic in his assessment of the change in the values of Nigerians. As from 1973, problems which emanated from the Nigerian political arena started to strain the reconciliation leader's capability. He found his assumptions of change in Nigeria's political culture wrong, and that the very issues which had led to the Civil War were simmering to the surface again, sending rough tremors throughout the political system. He became disappointed with Nigerians and frustrated in his work.

Gradually, as the pressures from the political arena loomed large on the horizon, Gowon correspondingly got embroiled in those problems which attracted most of his attention. The multidimensionality of the problems created greater administrative stress for this military man who had no channels of political communication or mobilization such as political parties. As he concentrated on problems in the larger polity, he gradually lost contact with his crucial military constituency. For a reconciliation leader, as we stated in Chapter 3, 'he remains in control as long as he is successful in politics of compromise and synthesis . . . in the present day Africa the reconciliation leader may have to perfect also the act of reconciling the military with civilian sectors of authority.'<sup>2</sup>

As Nigerian groups interacted at times with hostility reminiscent of the pre-Civil War years, Gowon gasped for breath and got 'soaked' in Nigeria's socio-political waters which easily drown its leaders or immobilizes them. He increasingly found it difficult to strike compromises among antagonistic groups, as illustrated by the demands for creation of additional states and the census exercises of 1973. He opted to leave them under the carpet until a more conducive or appropriate time. He had succeeded in doing this with the Dina Report and other problems before, but not this time. As many problems got tucked under the carpet, the carpet got 'soaked' as well and gradually emitted evidence of decay. The corroding effects of the problems under the carpet became more evident after Gowon had announced that the 1976 date of recivilianization of government was no longer realistic. By 1975, he had really lost his capabilities of reconciling 'the military with the civilian sectors of authority.' The conspicuous consumption and corruption of his lieutenants (whom only he could change or redeploy) worsened the situation and eroded whatever remained of his basis of legitimacy. In July 1975, he was gracefully eased out of the system.

In a way, perhaps Gowon had remained on the stage for too long to be able to play the reconciliation leader effectively. For a military man, he performed quite admirably. Should Gowon have withdrawn from political leadership after the Civil War in order to retain the credibility of Abraham Lincoln? Unlike Lincoln, Gowon did not have the unpleasant and painful 'luxury' of being transformed into a martyr through an assassin's bullet. His performance at peace time came under scrutiny. This writer does not believe that his withdrawal from political leadership immediately after the Civil War would have been useful. It would have made reconciliation more difficult. But perhaps he should have gone in 1976 and retained whatever remained of his credibility.

Like other leaders before him, and even after him, Gowon was a victim of Nigeria's socio-political environment which often immobilized or destroyed its leaders. While the complexities of the Nigerian political setting make it a reconciliation system, paradoxically, Nigerians ideally prefer a 'mobilization' leader who is swift, drastic and at times crude in his actions. Empirically, however, Nigerians would be the first to shout about the dictatorial traits of this leader. Nigerians basically respect a humble, quiet and moderate leader, but do not reckon that such leaders are capable of ruling the country.

The contradictions between the ideal leadership Nigerians want and their practical disposition or reluctance to follow this leadership explains the demise of many of their leaders. Thus we have a Gowon who was said to be 'too soft, slow and weak' and Murtala who was

reputedly 'swift, but too crude' - both immobilized and destroyed by the political system. It may need the evolution of a political culture in the future to resolve these contradictions.

In our view, therefore, the problems Gowon had were not really those of the low adaptive capability of a soldier-statesman (i.e. the problem of changing the techniques of administration in the barracks to those conducive to the administration of a state). They are partly socio-political and partly emanated from Gowon's basic traits which people hailed in inter-personal relations but deprecated in positions of authority. As Jemibewon observed, it 'is a paradox and tragedy of Gowon that the very virtues which he possessed in abundance, and which in private life would have marked him as a shining star for all to emulate, were just not the virtues on which the leader of a nation should depend for running his government.'<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Jemibewon was right. Nigerians are too impatient for a leader of Gowon's temperament, and yet too 'egalitarian' and 'democratic' in values for Murtala's mobilizational style.

Again another observation of Gowon is pertinent here:

The weakness of his administration which led to his downfall were the result of an overgenerous nature flowing with the milk of human kindness. He was kind and generous to a fault. He hated to hurt anyone and once he held a good opinion about you there was nothing anyone said to the contrary that would shake him from the opinion he had already formed. Above all, I believe Gowon to be a sincere and practising Christian who believed in forgiveness, not only seven times but even seventy times seven as Jesus Christ himself taught in the Gospels.<sup>4</sup>

To a very large extent Jemibewon was right, and Gowon is not the kind of man who would give his word to a government and organize a coup against that government. In this author's research, not even classified documents (which have not been used openly in this book) adequately indicate that Gowon was involved in the Dimka coup.

Gowon is, in the opinion of this writer, too fine a soldier and too principled a Christian to have got himself involved in such a catastrophic exercise in elite instability. He might not have been a strong leader of a military regime, but he was a very fine soldier, and exhibited more of a civilian style of leadership. It was not surprising that his military colleagues were angry at his pace, which they considered very unmilitary.

Whatever one says about Gowon, his contribution to the Nigerian state far outweighs his weaknesses. He, like other soldier-statesmen in developing countries, found that unless you relied on coercion, the longer you stay in office, the greater the strains on your abilities as a

reconciliation leader. Nigeria's Gowon was a soldier-statesman who de-emphasized the excessively coercive aspects of the soldier in order to build his vision of Nigeria. Throughout his rule, no political opponent was killed; even though some might have been in detention for some periods of time.

Again, let us end as we started, with Shakespeare's quotation – 'There are many events in the womb of time.' History is likely to be kinder to Gowon than the present public have been. This is already manifesting itself as Gowon is regaining his credibility in the light of the performances of his various successors. Perhaps then, once most of us who make various judgements (tinctured by emotions and self-interest) have gone, Nigeria will have survived all of us. Then history's sense of justice will dissect, interpret and evaluate the events of the past, and Gowon's contributions will have been assessed. It is likely that future generations will express gratitude to him as the 'father' of a New Nigerian State and Nation. Thus in the graveyard of history would stand a monument to YAKUBU CINWA GOWON – THE FATHER OF NEW NIGERIA.

## Notes

- 1 See Martin Dent, *West Africa*, No. 3266, 25 February, 1980, p. 360
- 2 Ali Mazrui, *op. cit.*, (1977) p. 7
- 3 Brigadier Jemibewon, *op. cit.*, p. 36
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 37

# APPENDIX A

## ARRANGEMENT FOR REVENUE ALLOCATION (1971/72)

<i>Type of Tax</i>	<i>Fed. Govt</i>	<i>States</i>
<i>Statutory Allowance</i>		
<i>Import Duty:</i>		
Tobacco	—	On basis of consumption by state
Beverages: Beer, Wine, Spirits	100%	—
Motor Spirit 1/9d per gallon		
Diesel Oil 1/11d	—	—
Motor Spirit } 2d per gallon		
Diesel Oil }		
*Unspecified	65%	—
<i>Export Duties:</i>		
Produce, Hides, and Skins	—	2/3 on basis of derivation i.e., 60% on basis of derivation 86.66 % of 1/3) = 13.66% 40% of 1/3 of) derivation
<i>Excise Duty:</i>		
Tobacco		
Motor Spirit	50%	—
Diesel Oil		
Unspecified		
<i>Mining Royalties &amp; Rents:</i>		
Offshore	100%	—
Onshore	5%	45% to state of origin
<i>Non-Statutory Allocation:</i>		
<i>Export Duty:</i>		
Animals, Birds, Reptiles, etc.	—	—

<i>Distributable Pool Account</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
—	The duty on petroleum products is 1/11d per gallon
—	—
100%	Authority Decree No. 13 of 1970 and Legal Notice No. 25 of 1969.
35%	—
—	Decree No. 13 of 1970 Customs Tariff No. 27 09/10. This affects only the additional proceeds from export duty on products attributable to the 5% inc. in rate of duty made by the Customs Tariff (Duties & Exemptions) (#2) Order 1969. All export duty revenues are allocated on the basis of derivation by export ratios
50%	—
—	Decree No. 9, 1971
50%	—
	See A (6)
	All Northern States: 7.0% each
	Lagos State: 2.0%
	Rivers State: 5.0%
	Midwest State: 8.0%
	South-Eastern State: 7.5%
	East-Central State: 17.5%
	Western State: 18.0%

# Notes

## A. COMPOSITION OF DISTRIBUTABLE POOL ACCOUNT

- 1 2d duty per gallon on petroleum products
- 2 35% of duty on Unspecified Import Duty
- 3 40% of 1/3 of Export Duty on Produce, Hides and Skins
- 4 50% of Excise Duty on Tobacco, Motor Spirit, Diesel Oil, and Unspecified Products
- 5 50% of Mining Royalties and Rents on Inshore concessions
- 6 Export Duty on Animals, Birds and Reptiles

## B. SHARING OF DISTRIBUTABLE POOL ACCOUNT

- 1 50% on equal basis
- 2 50% on population basis

## C. STATES POPULATION (PERCENTAGES) FOR THE PURPOSES OF B(2) ABOVE

<i>State</i>	<i>Percentage Population</i>
Lagos	2.59
Rivers	2.73
Kwara	4.42
Midwest	4.56
South-Eastern	6.42
Benue-Plateau	7.21
North-Central	7.35
North-Western	10.30
Kano	10.37
East-Central	12.99
North-Eastern	14.00
Western	17.06
	<u>100.00</u>

Source: Budget Division, Federal Ministry of Finance, Lagos.

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