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## Echoes of April 22

(**The Guardian**, November 4, 2004)

In 1981, fifteen years after the first military coup in Nigeria, two leading participants in that event brought out accounts of what actually happened. And in doing so, they tried to explain and justify their participation. Major Adewale Ademoyega brought out **Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup**, while Captain Ben Gbulie produced **Nigeria's Five Majors: Coup d'etat of 15<sup>th</sup> January 1966, First Inside Account**. Before then, an account by another leading participant, Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, had been circulating in manuscript; but, to the best of my knowledge, it has never been published. The original manuscript is now believed to be lost. I call these stories "participant-accounts".

By "participant - accounts" I do not mean "objective" accounts given by participants who refrain from admitting their roles, or down-play them. I do not mean accounts by hypocrites, falsifiers of records and "sanitizers" of history. I have read fake accounts by sadists, reactionaries and murderers, especially those who eventually attained power, or found themselves in the "corridors of power". I do not mean these self-serving accounts. What I mean by "participant accounts" are bold accounts by coupists who had believed -whether they still believe or not - in the course they

pursued and who thereafter sought to share their motives, experiences and lessons with the general public.

For the avoidance of doubt, I do not regard the official records *of* coup investigations and trials as released or leaked to the media as participant -accounts. Nor can the usually heavily censored media reports of the opening and closing sessions of coup trials be regarded as participant - accounts. We know that in treason trials many defenders admit to the most fantastic suggestions only as a mean of ending the physical and psychological torture to which they are being subjected. I suggest to researchers the investigation of the trials that followed the Dimka coup of February 1976 and the Orka coup of April 22, 1990, which is the subject of this piece. And from more distant history, I refer readers to the Moscow trials of early 1930s conducted by Joseph Stalin. Here, foremost leaders of the Russian Revolution, such as Nicolai Bukharin, had to admit to the torturers' suggestions that they were "counter-revolutionaries" and "imperialist agents" merely to end their humiliation and torture - and hasten their executions.

On Sunday, April 22, 1990, in the fifth year of General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime, an attempt was made to overthrow the government by force. Led by serving middle-rank military officers, the bulk of the rebel force consisted of non-serving soldiers and volunteers. The coup attempt, which was concentrated in Lagos, the federal government headquarters, was crushed by late afternoon of that day. Then followed the usual announcements, arrests, secret trials and executions. **The Guardian** has just published what I think are excerpts from an account of that event by one of its leaders, Captain Sowaribi Tolofari who is said to be "the last man to withdraw from the battlefield in the face of defeat". (See **The Guardian** 26/9/2004, 3/10/2004 and 10/10/2004). The 286 - page book, according to the newspaper, has the title **Exploitation and Instability in Nigeria: The Orka Coup in Perspective**. I regard this book as a participant-account.

I shall limit myself in this review to the political manifesto of the rebel leaders, and what Tolofari thought were the reasons for their failure to achieve their immediate objective, namely, the overthrow of Babangida's regime. We may quickly dispose of the latter. Tolofari said the main reason for their failure was their inability to arrest

the strategic army commanders or, at least, neutralize them by separating them from the troops they commanded. These commanders included the military president who was the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Next to this was their failure to attract officers and troops of "Middle Belt and Southern" origins to their side as soon as the rebellion began. The rebel leader denied that the announcement of the excision of the "core North" from the federation alienated officers and troops who might, otherwise, have swung to their side.

I leave the first reason to students of military science and strategic studies. The second reason goes to political strategists. My only question here is why the rebel leaders did not consider capturing the whole country first, and then announce the excision - which they could **then** enforce. Or, in the alternative, why **did they** not simply announce a rebellion, **and** call for negotiations - during which they would present their demand? In the July 1966 coup late Murtala Mohammed and other rebellious junior officers attempted to pull the Northern Region out of the federation. But they were countered by Colonel Yakubu Gowon who reasoned, or was assisted to reason, that it was better to take the whole country and then proceed to execute the other elements of the coup agenda. To what extent were the 1990 coup leaders aware of this?

Who were the April 22 rebels and why did they take up arms against the Nigerian state? Captain Tolofari said that the coup attempt was an action by "officers of the Middle Belt and the South to shake off the domination of, and internal colonization by, the Muslim North". The specific objectives, according to them, were: to stop General Babangida from perpetuating himself in power "at all costs", by removing him from office; to remove the ruling bloc from power; and to lay "strong egalitarian foundation for real, democratic take-off of Nigerian states as the circumstances may decide". The self-perpetuating ruling bloc, the rebels alleged, was responsible for "99 percent of our problems as Nigerians". In the context of Nigerian politics such a platform cannot be described as strange even today, much less in 1990. Shed of embellishments, that is the meaning of "shaking hands across the Niger and across the Benue", a bourgeois civilian platform that is as fresh today as it was in April 1990.

The next question is why the rebels decided to pursue their agenda in the particular way they chose. Tolofari said: "Ideally, we should split into North, South, Middle-Belt, West and East (which would include Bendel). The entire South could confederate or work as an economic union". That was their political platform. By "North" they meant Sokoto State (which now includes the present Zamfara and Kebbi States), Kano State (which now includes Jigawa State), Borno State (which now includes Yobe State), and Bauchi State (which now includes Gombe State). They decided to immediately excise this "North", retaining the name Nigeria for the Middle Belt and the larger South (that is, East and West). No name was given to the excised segment. Compare this with what some rebellious army officers attempted to do on July 29, 1966. The latter decided to leave Nigeria for those then governing the country. Although they did not succeed, their agenda made more sense: You don't expel regions and people from a polity; you may decide to leave it - as Biafra later did, in May 1967.

Captain Tolofari said that, to achieve the same objective (freeing the Middle Belt and South from the domination of the North), politicians from the Middle Belt and the South could work together with their compatriots in the National Assembly to affect a restructuring of the polity in such a way as to weaken the center. But he considered this option almost impossible to achieve. Why? Because "our southern politicians were always looking for northern sponsors, always trying to outdo themselves in the search for second fiddle alignments and coalitions with northerners". He added: "Such politicians could not be expected to come to an agreement over such a motion, much more to table it and pursue it in the National Assembly". So, the issue had to be posed by force the way the rebels did. I leave Tolofari's thesis to professional politicians and political scientists to chew.

Tolofari believes that the rebels had been vindicated by history: "What the fools and slave-minded people in Nigeria did not see, which we fought against-five years after Babangida's ascendancy-came close to happening three years after he sacrificed our lives to show and prevent it. The tyranny that we wanted to nip in the bud became full-grown". He defended the harsh language he employed in the book: "I want the content of this book to be understood by anyone who reads it; therefore I have not used high-

sounding but irrelevant words as the politicians and other public commentators do. In that way they addressed only themselves and deceived the public". He continued: "I will say, in plain and unambiguous terms, all those things that Nigerians, out of cowardice or in real fear of the times, say in whispers only in the relative security of their bedrooms and hearts". Again, I leave this criticism to professional politicians to chew.

Captain Tolofari was obviously addressing Nigerian politicians when he said: "I died when the revolution failed; I died when my comrades were tied to stakes and shot on July 27 and September 13, 1990. I cannot be better or deader now if tomorrow assassins shot or bombed me. Nigerians rank among the world's foremost equivocators. I wish to make myself an exception. Nigerians are amongst the world's best issue doggers. I wish to make myself an exception".